

Chapter 1

Beta read by frustr8dwriter

This story begins in the summer holidays after Harry's second year at Hogwarts. Great changes are going to take place during his third year that he has no knowledge of. He is going to be united with all of his family, namely Sirius, Lupin, and of course the person he is going to spend the rest of his life with. I do not own the Characters of Harry Potter. I must warn if it looks as if I have copied certain ideas from other authors, I like them so I'm using a little of it in my story.

Introduction

At the beginning of time, the Creator created a Magical world so that it would become a safe haven for those who had the gift to use magic.

He had the gift of prophesy and knew that there would be times when Darkness engulfed the Magical World and only a selected group of outstanding and powerful individuals would be able to bring the world out of chaos each time. Harmony and stability would be built with their blood sweat, and tears. It was a noble yet terrible task for any individual to take upon his shoulders.

His heart ached as he watched the trials these chosen ones had to face alone as they gave their all. Out of compassion, he gave these souls a precious and powerful gift. The soul could never be perfect, so he created other souls that would complete them. In addition, he had given these souls more power and the power would remain dormant until the souls were united as one. He then tied a red thread of Fate between them so that their fates would always be intertwined. These fated souls would only start their search for the other when both of them were emotionally and physically mature enough to complete the bonding process.

The Creator had hoped that by creating the bond between the two souls, they could comfort and support each other as they overcome harsh trials together. The two people would be known as true soul mates. A cruel fate of utter regret, deep mental anguish, despair, loneliness awaited them if the souls never got the opportunity to be

united as one. Therefore, He created a set of special laws to protect them. Prior engagements and marriages would be nullified once the bonding is completed. They would also be legally recognised as being married at the instant they become one. The crime of forcing the true soul mates apart was seen as the equivalent of first degree murder. In another words, offenders were punishable by the highest sentence that the court could pass.

When the two souls bind, it will awaken dormant powers residing deep in their souls. Together, they will have the power to attain new heights and forge new chapters in History. Their heart, minds, and souls will forever be interlinked and not even death could tear them apart.

The Creator prized love. He had also created other weaker bonds like Familiar bonds and Marriage bonds that would tie two individuals together of their own will if they decide to pursue a deeper relationship.

He finally created a secret tome that would be passed down from government to government. The book automatically records the names of wizards and witches when they are born into the world so that they have access to the Magical World. It also has another function. When the name of one of the souls who have a soul bond appears in the book, the name of his soul mate would magically appear next to his name.

When Harry James Potter's name was finally added into the book on the day he was born, another name had materialized next to his.

Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey

The stunning brown-haired girl had been in his dreams for several nights. In the beginning, he felt guilty. She was his friend after all. After a while, he welcomed them. The dreams made his harsh life with his magic-phobic relatives bearable. He looked forward every night to slip away from all the abuse, insults, and insecurity into his dreams where he could hold her close to him and allow the warmth of their love to wash away all his fears, wounds, and burdens away and

replace them with joy and peace from the completeness of being together.

She was in his dreams again, lying peacefully next to him as he admired her. She's just so beautiful.

He stroked her smooth porcelain cheeks as he basked in the joy of feeling her soft skin. His finger gently traced her jaw as he stared at the girl longingly. He could detect the faint scent of vanilla in her brown hair. She had shut her eyes in contentment and he was glad that she was enjoying his tender ministrations. Growing slightly bolder, Harry gingerly drew his fingers along her lips. He was lost in the feel of her velvet lips. He longed to kiss her and to taste if she was as sweet as her scent. He simply did not have the power to tear his eyes from that particular feature.

"Harry, don't tease me this way." Hermione whispered softly as she revealed those alluring eyes. He smiled indulgently as he gently played with her rather bushy brown hair by curling the ends up with his fingers. He liked her hair the way it was. Personally, he rather liked to think her hair wasn't really bushy; it was more "untamable", just like her.

"How am I teasing you, Hermione?" He chuckled lightly as the contentment of being with her warmed every corner of his heart and his heart was going to burst from that overwhelming feeling of bliss.

Hermione had smiled broadly as she relaxed next to him. Harry loved that smile; even though most had said that it was marred by two slightly buck teeth. It was just Hermione Jane Granger and she could never be anything lesser than beautiful in his eyes.

"By doing that." She answered as her lips curved upwards.

The thought that he knew what she had exactly meant made him laugh. With a courage he knew he wouldn't have in reality, he leaned over and placed a feathery kiss on her lips. The moment their lips had touched, his world exploded like fireworks, filling him with sensations he could not identify. It was electrifying. It was earth shattering. The simple kiss shook his world and reshaped his perception of it.

Their lips had parted after a while. Hermione beamed happily as she snuggled closer to his chest and Harry had wrapped his arms protectively around her.

Harry sighed from the warmth of her and he marvelled at the fact that she fit perfectly in his arms. The world no longer mattered, only she did. He wished he could remain like this with her forever.

You can't.

The dreaded voice of logic decided to dose him with cold hard truth by reminding him that this was not reality and he woke up. Tears were running rapidly down his cheeks when Harry Potter jerked up from his sleep.

Did he really want her that way?

Harry could not deny that he'd always felt a pull towards her. He was powerless to stop himself from trying to spend all his time with her. This was the main reason for his good results in school. He was ranked second in terms of academics in his year, right behind Hermione, simply due to the number of hours they had studied together in the library.

He could not help admiring how brilliant his good friend was even though he really didn't pay attention to girls. Some of his dorm mates tend to tease him about his lack of interest in girls but they didn't understand that he did. The only difference was that he could not see anyone else but her. She was the pinnacle of perfection to him.

She is your best friend!

Harry groaned as he rubbed his face with his two hands as he chided himself. I really should not continue to delude myself.

Harry Potter really had no family in this world. His parents had died when Voldemort had come for him a decade ago. He was left in the care of his only living relatives, the Dursleys, who hated him with a passion. Luckily, he had two great friends whom he'd known for about

three years, Ron Weasley and Hermione Jean Granger. He was grateful for their companionship.

He could not bear to ask more from Hermione since trouble was more of his middle name than James was. For goodness sake, she was petrified last year because of him! Besides, how could a person who has never been loved love? Hermione was so amazing that he felt that he lacked the ability to be the perfect person for her.

Harry drew a hand through his usually messy raven hair with deep frustration as the images of Hermione kept flashing through his head. He lay flat on his bed and willed himself to sleep.

Miles away, in a large comfortable room, a brown-haired girl was sleeping. She was unaware of the dreams that her good friend was having of her. She was dreaming of a messy raven-haired guy with dreamy green eyes.

On this particular night, they had been lying next to each other. He had been watching her with those piercing emerald eyes as he caressed her jaw. To make this dream so memorable, they had shared a light kiss for the first time ever.

There were no words to describe that innocent kiss. Her world had rocked beneath her and she was reminded of one thing again. Her world had never spun around another axis since she first laid her eyes on the scrawny green-eyed boy. Her world just spun around him.

With that unsettling revelation, she shot up from her bed with her eyes wide open. The taste of his lips seemed to linger on her lips and she tentatively touched them. Did she just dream of kissing Harry Potter? The Harry Potter, her best friend?

She never felt so conflicted. On one hand, she was upset that she had dreamt of kissing her good friend in her dream; on the other hand, she enjoyed the feeling of being with him. She felt so complete. Well, being with him in dreams.

She knew that she was drawn to him from the day they had first met on the train to Hogwarts. Hermione could not help but wondered if

she made an impression on Harry then but he certainly did made an impression for her. She would never forget the first time when she first looked into those emerald eyes and saw his soul. The sight was captivating and it drew her to him immediately. From that point of time, Hermione knew that her new life as a witch would always be entwined with this gaunt green-eyed boy.

Realistic Hermione would never live in her fantasy world. Muggle-born Hermione Granger and Famous Boy-who-lived Harry Potter? No way, she sighed. She knew herself well; she just simply wasn't physically attractive enough to catch the eye of the most famous wizard in Great Britain.

It was only six in the morning and Hermione was already wide-awake, reading the very same page she had been reading for the past half hour. The images of Harry smiling were still vivid in her mind and they were making it impossible for her to concentrate on anything that she was doing.

Snapping the book closed loudly, she stood up with great frustration and paced around the room. The feeling of attraction to him was getting stronger day by day. It was bordering on excessive since it was distracting her badly.

The restless pacing of the daughter caught the attention of her sensitive mother.

"Sweetheart, is something wrong?" Jean Granger asked as she looked at her daughter. She had been paying attention to her daughter since she had come back from the holidays. Hermione's strange behaviour did not go unnoticed. She had no appetite and was very agitated as if there was something bothering her.

"I'm alright." She answered flatly. "I guess it's the heat that is troubling me." Hermione answered as she shrugged nonchalantly.

"I've watched you grow up for the past 13 years; do you really think I wouldn't know if you are hiding something?" Jean asked with deep concern as she sat next to her daughter.

Time had really flown; her only child, Hermione, had grown into a fine young lady who had the mark of a future ravishing beauty. "Let me guess, you miss your friends?" She asked as she raised her eyebrows in a questioning manner.

"There's absolutely no way I can hide anything from you, mummy." Hermione smiled tenderly as she watched her mother beamed. It was true to a certain extent, but she really only missed one particular friend.

Suddenly an idea just popped up in her head. "Mummy, is it alright that I invite Harry to stay with us for the rest of our holiday? Ron is currently in Egypt with his family so he can't invite us over. Harry is all alone with his dreadful relatives. I don't fancy the idea of leaving him at the mercy of those people for the whole holiday." Hermione growled protectively at the thought of Dursleys before pleading her case to her mother again.

Jean had heard a little of his relatives' treatment of Harry. That coupled with the pleading look in her daughter's chocolate eyes made her unable to reject her request.

As an adult, she had to weight the options. There were several pros; first, she could get to know more about the company Hermione keeps when she is back at school. Second, Hermione would be happier to have someone of her age to play with. However, it was not proper for a girl to have a boy staying at her place and she wanted to spend more family time with her daughter. After much consideration, she decided she could always supervise both of them and they could definitely include Harry into their plans.

"I'll bring the issue up with your father and see how he feels about it. If he agrees, you can ask Harry if he wants to come over to our house for the rest of the holiday." Jean answered with a smile. Hermione beamed as she dashed upstairs to look for her father and ask for his permission. After a while, she could hear Hermione's squeals of delight as she bounced to the nearest phone to call Harry at his Uncle's place.

“Let him know that we’ll pick him up from his house tomorrow afternoon at one, sweetheart.” She added with a smile. Jean was happy to see her daughter being so enthusiastic – it was comparable to the time when she had discovered that she was a witch. Hermione was simply too excited to sleep.

It was seven in the morning at the Dursley's residence. Everyone but Harry was eating breakfast, enjoying the quiet morning when the telephone in the living room rang, disrupting the tranquility. Vernon's face had turned mildly red with irritation at the disturbance.

“Who in the right mind would call us so early? Harry, go pick up that call!” Vernon bellowed from the kitchen as he sat at the table, reading the morning newspaper.

Harry grudgingly listened and dragged himself to pick the call. The voice of the caller was a balm to his mood.

“Hi, I am looking for Harry Potter.”

It was a sweet feminine voice that Harry had no trouble recognising and his heart began to flutter.

“Hermione, is that you?” Harry asked happily. He finally could talk to his good friend! He did not bother to hide his excitement and she giggled in response.

“Yes, I’m calling to ask if you’d like to come over to my place for the rest of my holidays.”

He could not believe his ears. Her parents had actually given her the permission to have a male friend over at their place for holidays!

“I’ll ask my uncle, give me a minute.” Harry answered as he placed the receiver on the table and dashed into the kitchen.

“Uncle Vernon, my friend has just invited me to stay at their place for the rest of the holidays. Is it alright that I join them?” He asked as he secretly crossed his fingers, hoping that his uncle would allow.

His uncle merely grunted a yes.

He nearly gave a celebratory yell but he controlled himself in time. He dashed back to the foyer to give Hermione his answer.

"We'll pick you up tomorrow at one. I can't wait to see you, Harry."

He confirmed his address with her and was pleased that he was leaving his relative's place tomorrow. His holiday had become much better. Harry tried to hide his smile as he informed his uncle of the arrangements.

His uncle had merely grunted again, satisfied that he did not need to do anything to get rid of the freak in the house. "Finish the chores for next two days and I will sign that blasted form of yours. Just remember not to return until next year." He muttered under his breath as he flipped to the next page.

Harry had to suppressed the joy that was threatening to burst inside of him desperately. The last thing the Dursleys would ever like to do is to make him happy. He struggled to keep an emotionless face as he walked to his sanctuary on the excuse of packing his he was finally out of earshot, near his own bedroom, he punched the air in victory as he went into his room to talk to his beautiful snowy white owl, Hedwig. She was sitting in the cage looking curiously at him with those large amber eyes of hers. He could feel her curiosity through a rather remote part of him and he answered her.

"I'm going to spend the rest of the holiday with Hermione. She invited me to stay at her place and her parents are picking me up tomorrow. Uncle Vernon has also promised to sign the Hogsmeade form." Harry beamed brightly as he scratched a spot under her beak as she hooted in delight.

"You miss Hermione too, don't you? Miss all the attention she gives you?" He laughed as he tickled his stunning owl. Hedwig merely hooted in excitement as she leapt on his shoulder.

Suddenly an idea came into his head, "Hedwig, why don't you take a letter to Hermione and wait for me to join you? I'll write a note for her

to inform her to keep you until I come.” He grinned as he quickly scrawled a note for Hedwig to take it to Hermione. Hedwig hooted happily and took off immediately after he attached the note to her leg.

It was time for some packing!

Harry grinned as he began to pack all his things into his trunk as he hummed a cheery tune.

It was approaching one in the afternoon and Harry had already moved his trunk and his empty cage outside as he waited excitedly for the arrival of the Grangers. Uncle Vernon had even signed the form as he had promised, thus making it one of the best days he’d had in non-magical Britain. Harry didn’t care if he was grinning like an idiot where everyone could see him. He was just too happy to care.

Soon, a modest black sedan halted at the gate. Before his mind could register it, he felt a brown bushy-haired missile tackling him as she dashed straight into him. He wrapped his arms around her as the impact knocked them onto the grass as they laughed heartily together.

When they had finally stopped laughing, Harry managed to take a good look at her.

It was the same face that he dreamt of every night and he remembered every single detail of it. Seeing Hermione in person after dreaming of her for so many nights choked him up with so many emotions, Harry could only stare at her wordlessly. Her fair porcelain cheeks were slightly flushed as those chocolate orbs fixed tenderly on him. The desire to caress her cheeks was strong but he resisted and decided to watch her instead. She was tucking the loose tendrils of brown hair behind her ear as she smiled at him.

Hermione watched the range of emotions being played out on his face. It was quite fascinating how much Harry could feel in just a short time. The admiration in his piercing emerald eyes was simply too much for her to bear so she decided to distract him.

"You look as if it's very comfortable lying on the grass." She stood up and lent a hand for him to take. "But we don't have all day." She smiled warmly.

Harry had to resist the urge of tucking those brown tendrils that had begun to fly messily behind her ear. With great effort, he snapped himself out of his trance and followed her to meet her parents.

"Mummy and Daddy, this is Harry. Harry, meet my parents." Hermione beamed brightly as she introduced her rather nervous good friend to them. She placed a comforting hand on his arm and he relaxed visibly with her support.

Jean observed the young lad in front of her and came to a conclusion that he was a nice young man. "Hi Harry, please call me Jean." She smiled warmly as she hugged him. When she had let go of him, Harry greeted back as he adjusted his glasses. It was now Dan Granger's turn. He stared at Harry with a critical eye. He had noticed that he looked rather small for his age and guessed that he had went through a period where he was not fed properly. In all, he judged him as a nice boy so he extended his hand to him. "I'm Dan Granger. It is nice to meet you Harry."

Harry immediately took his hand.

"Nice meeting you too, Mr. Granger." He smiled nervously as they shook their hands. Harry was relieved when he saw a soft smile on the elder's man face.

"Daddy is just trying to make you sweat, Harry." Hermione laughed heartily as she watched the exchange. Her father liked to intimidate younger guys and make them pale in fear for the fun of it.

"I'll go get my stuff." Harry said as he went to retrieve his trunk and his cage as Dan helped to make some space to put them at the back of the car. When everything was stowed and everyone was buckled up for the journey, they finally began the trip to Granger's house in Knightdale.

Harry could hardly believe his luck - he was leaving his relative's house at the start of his holiday and he was simply overjoyed. However, Harry soon found himself in a quandary. He was supposed to sit beside a girl that he had dreamt of all summer in a confined space for a length of time. This became one of the greatest challenges Harry had ever faced. It was worse than facing the Basilisk alone in the Chambers of Secret. They were just seating a short distance away from each other.

Harry could feel a strange and strong feeling of attraction to Hermione. He simply had a desperate need to kiss her as if his life had depended on it. Harry tried to concentrate on the conversation they were having as he fervently hoped that the need would pass.

Hermione, on the other hand, also had the same difficulty. Her attention was on everything else but the conversation. She could not help staring at his alluring green eyes or his kissable lips. She decided to distract herself by chattering endlessly about all the mundane stuff under the sun. If it wasn't for her raging hormones, she would've noticed that Harry was being weirder than usual, actively participating in topics that would usually bore him within seconds.

Neither could understand what had changed that caused them to start dreaming of each other or having a need to be so physically close to each other.

"Did you manage to do any of your homework?" Harry asked. He was searching for a topic they had not touched and he realised that they had yet to talk about homework. It was a safe topic to bring up since Hermione probably finished her work by the third day she was back at home. Hermione was probably doing supplementary readings as usual. Harry was not prepared for the bomb Hermione was going to drop on him.

"No." Hermione answered softly as she turned away to look out the window at the scenery zooming past them.

Harry had to strain his ears to hear her answer and when he finally realised what she had said, his jaw dropped. Had he heard her correctly?!

“Why? I mean that’s so not you, Hermione.” Harry asked in deep concern. Something must be wrong!

Her face was slightly red when she had turned to look at him. “I was just distracted.”

Distracted? Hermione was blushing too!?

Harry knew what that meant. Hermione had an infatuation for someone!

His heart sank instantly at the thought. It felt as if someone had just drenched him with a bucket of cold water, numbing his heart. He simply couldn't breathe because of the pain that was radiating from his chest. He was never thought anything would hurt as bad as this, to know that she finally liked someone.

Turning away so that she would not be able to see the dejection plainly on his face, he muttered, “Oh.” She was of that age to fall in love anyway. I wonder who that lucky guy is. Maybe I rather not know.

The chocolate eyes widened at the sight of Harry's discomfort and she immediately jumped to conclusions.

Oh no! Did he know what the distraction was? He couldn't!

She didn't want him to know her feelings for him this way. Hermione glanced at her good friend and found that he really looked very upset.

Did he not have the same feelings for me? That particular thought made her feel as if a boulder had weighed her heart down. It was too painful to think that he just didn't like her the same way she did.

She blanked out her mind and focused on the scenery outside of the window, hoping to turn off those depressing thoughts before she become upset.

Desperately wanting to be the good friend that offered support and interest, he failed because he simply could not bring up the topic

without sounding bitter. With a sigh, he focused on the scenery outside of the window dejectedly and the two teenagers did not utter a single word for the rest of their journey.

What seem like a good holiday was fast turning into a horrible one.

A/N: This is my first attempt at Harry Potter. Not sure if it's going to be okay. Well, I hope you enjoy it. Thank you frustr8dwriter for the excellent work.

Chapter 2

The finalisation of the bond and Harry's past.

Granger residence, in the middle of the night

"Hermione, is it okay if we talk? I know it is rather late and you probably want to sleep but I can't. It's about..." Harry drew his hand through his messy raven hair as he shifted uncomfortably outside of Hermione's room. It sounded awfully stupid, he growled mentally as he pondered furiously for another way to bring the issue up.

He was standing in front of her room, facing her door, as he tried to practice how he should bring up the subject that was bothering him since the trip to her place. Harry knew that he did not sound excited enough when they took him on a tour around their modest house and he was rather lifeless at dinner even though he could tell that Mrs. Granger had put a lot of effort in preparing the meal. They had a rather tense dinner since they were not talking to each other all evening. When the day had finally ended, and both of them were sent to their rooms, Harry had trouble sleeping because of the conversation he'd had with Hermione. Harry knew he'd never rest if he didn't get an answer from her. Moreover, he was not comfortable with the fact that Hermione looked rather upset at dinner.

He tried to talk to his owl, Hedwig, about it but she did not even want to listen to him. Harry had no doubt that she was ignoring him because of Hermione. Harry had to try to talk to her before the night had ended.

"Hermione, I think we should talk. Well, I guess you are that age to miss... Sweet Merlin, that sounds even worse." Harry hissed to himself as he kicked the wall in deep frustration. He was nearly scared out of his wits when the door opened suddenly, revealing a petite girl. It was simply too dark to see her but he could tell from that familiar faint vanilla scent that it was Hermione.

"Harry, why are you at my door?" She whispered in surprise as she peered at the person at the door. It was dark but she could make out from the shape that it was Harry. She could tell that he was rather

nervous because he was shifting uncomfortably as he scratched his head.

“Were you crying, Hermione?” His voice filled with worry.

Her voice was unusually rough as if she'd been crying before she heard that kick. Anxious to see if it was really true, he closed the distance between them and gently pushed her into the room so that he could see her better.

In the pale moonlight, Harry could see traces of tears glistening on her cheeks.

Hermione quickly wiped any traces of her tears with a swipe using both of her hands but Harry caught them firmly and lowered them to her side as he inched in closer. His emerald eyes never looked as intense as she nervously met his gaze.

“Why? Did someone hurt you? Is it that guy?” Harry asked harshly.

Hermione blinked in confusion before answering, “What guy, Harry?”

She saw him stiffen for a moment as he forced out the answer.

“The distraction, the guy you like. Did he hurt you?” Hermione took a step away from him as she lowered her head silently. A moment of relief washed over her when she realised that he didn't know that she liked him and thus could not be upset about her feelings for him. Hermione had other things to worry about - like finding a suitable way to answer him.

Harry took a step closer to her as he hissed. “Who is he?” His emerald eyes had flared furiously. Hermione would've chuckled if her good friend wasn't so livid. Instead, she placed a hand on his chest, halting him from getting any closer to her as their eyes connected. Hermione could feel the tension in his body and could tell that he was very angry with the phantom guy that she apparently liked.

The soft chocolate eyes staring caringly at him cooled him down a little. Harry held her soft hand to his chest as he relaxed.

"You were distracted all holiday because you miss a guy, right?" He asked in a resigned tone as he drew his free hand through his messy hair. Even though he knew that it was obvious that Hermione was apparently in love with someone, he needed to hear it from her.

Hermione tried to turn away from him but he held her hand to his chest and she had no choice but to look at him. Her chocolate orbs could hide nothing from him and Harry got the answer immediately. The emerald eyes became slightly cloudy because of the conflicts within him but he took a deep breath and asked the next question.

"Was he the cause of your tears?" Harry asked gently as he searched her chocolate eyes and once again he got his answer. He could feel his blood boiling with rage but he took a deep breath to calm himself before he asked his next question.

"Who is it?" He questioned stiffly. Hermione did not response but she did not break the eye connection. "Ron?" Harry guessed. "Neville?" His green eyes were wide with surprise. "Diggory?" He tried that name since he knew a lot of girls liked him. With each wrong guess, he felt even more frustrated. His good friend was usually with him, who could that guy be? "It can't be Draco, can it?" He tried it as the last resort. Hermione was giggling harder with each outrageous guess. Harry finally gave up. "Never mind - have I met him before?"

Hermione was sitting on her bed laughing at his last guess. She could not believe her ears that he had even thought it might be Malfoy.

"If you don't want to divulge his name, it's okay. Is he nice to you?" He growled with irritation as he watched her laugh. She was now clutching her stomach from all the laughing and had even started tearing as she rolled around on her bed. Her face was alternating between laughing and wincing as tears began to flow down her cheeks. It was such an amusing sight that Harry forgot all about the guy and started laughing at her. After a while, Harry had ended up on the floor in the same fix as Hermione. After a long while, he had finally stopped laughing as he stretched himself on the floor, catching his breath. Hermione had already got over it and both of them just lay

at their respective areas, enjoying the silence as he forgot all about his plan of talking to Hermione.

However, Hermione reminded him.

"Harry why were you at my door at the middle of the night?" She asked as she turned to lie on her side so she could look at Harry. He had closed his eyes.

"I wanted to ask you about the guy. I couldn't sleep until I had the answers. I want to know if the guy is good enough for you. You're so beautiful. I don't want just any plain average Joe to be with you. It must be someone who knows your value and can cherish you." He answered as he enjoyed the gently night breeze caressing his cheeks. Harry was not entirely truthfully but a part of him really did want her to be with a guy who would treasure her and understand how precious she really was.

"I'm not beautiful like other girls" She stammered, "I have bushy hair and I have buck ..." She returned with a flustered face, but she couldn't finish because she felt him suddenly above her, staring intensely at her as he covered her mouth with his hand.

"Don't ever say that of yourself, ever. You're smart, loyal, fun to be with, and a whole lot more." He allowed a small smile. "The list is unending. They may be pretty but you have both inner and outer beauty." He stated firmly, leaving no room for arguments. "Besides, I think of your hair as having its own personality rather than bushy." Harry grinned broadly as he took a lock of her hair and played with it. Hermione matched his smile with one of her own.

If you like it, then it is fine.

"Thank you, Harry." She whispered. She was glad that Harry couldn't really see her face or he'd realise that she had blushed.

"You're welcome." He smiled as he climbed off her and settled beside her. He could feel the longing in his nether regions and did not want to do something that he might regret. Harry had missed the look of regret on his good friend's face with the absence of his comforting

weight on her when he'd lowered his head to ponder how he should tell her without revealing his feelings.

"I wanted to apologise for my behaviour this evening. I know it's no fun when I'm brooding. I guess I was just a little concerned about your distraction, Hermione. You must really like the guy to be distracted from your work." Harry muttered as he drew his hand through his messy raven hair.

She didn't want to confirm his assumptions since it would lead to more awkward questions, so she smiled and answered that it was alright. She knew it was getting late and they both needed their sleep. Mustering all her courage as a Gryffindor, she leaned over and pecked him on the cheek and allowed her lips to linger on his cheek longer than it was needed for a simple good night kiss. Hermione stood up and went to the door, "Goodnight, Harry. It's time to get to bed."

Harry was taken aback by the sudden gesture. Staring blankly at the figure standing next to the door, he gently touched the spot where her lips had touched. Did she just kiss him on the cheek? When he finally broke from his trance, he scrambled out of her bed and said his good night and dashed back to his room, blushing.

That silly guy thinks I'm in love with another guy, she thought in amusement. Didn't he know that she didn't have many friends and spent all her time with him and Ron? Ron was totally out of the question because he was simply too immature for her. Anybody could have deduced who he was but Harry had to be oblivious about it! She shook her head at the thought before she collapsed on her bed.

Was Harry simply protective or being jealous? That was the last issue on her mind as she fell deeply asleep, dreaming of that silly, messy black hair guy with alluring green eyes.

Harry was smiling stupidly as he touched his cheek and climbed into the large comfortable bed. Hermione had kissed him on the cheek! Harry was swooning about the peck on the face even though a large part of it wanted it on his lips. Well if it was really a platonic gesture, she would have given him a quick kiss, would she not?

With a large goofy smile on his face, he closed his eyes and fell asleep dreaming of a certain brown hair girl.

For the delightful and under-appreciated dinner, Harry decided to wake up earlier to cook for them since it was a chore he did every morning at Dursleys. Whistling as he worked, he began making coffee first as he warmed the pan and began to cook the bacon and the omelettes. He finished the whole breakfast by toasting several pieces of bread.

He really loved cooking even though he had been coerced by his relatives to learn. It made him feel as if he was no different from anyone else who spent their time doing domestic chores and not the Boy-who-lived. When the entire Granger family awakened and managed to trudge down to the kitchen to begin their day, their jaws had dropped as they took in the sight of a hearty breakfast on the dining table. Harry had just finished cleaning up the cooking area when he realised that he was not alone.

“Good morning, Mr. and Mrs. Granger. Good morning, Hermione. Did you have a good night’s sleep?” He asked politely as he set the apron aside. A large smile was plastered on his face as he continued. “I don’t know what you usually have for breakfast but I hope you like it. It’s a thank you for last night’s excellent dinner.”

Harry knew that he was not as appreciative of Mrs. Granger’s efforts for the dinner as he should’ve been and wanted to express his gratitude fully.

A sweet and nice lad, Jean thought as she smiled warmly back at the young man hanging the pan back to where it belonged. Harry looked as if he was no stranger to the kitchen.

“Call me Jean, Harry. You didn’t have to make breakfast. It was my pleasure.” She said as she eyed the table that was groaning at the weight of the delicious breakfast. It really looked mouth-watering. Unable to contain her growing hunger at the sight of the spread, she sat down.

"It's alright." Harry assured warmly as he took the coffee jar. "Would you like some coffee?" He politely asked the adults around the table. They nodded and he proceeded to pour the hot steaming coffee into four mugs.

Hermione had beamed with great appreciation for him when she realised that he remembered her love for coffee. Hermione could guess how little sleep he caught just to make this meal since her family had always begun their day early. Harry couldn't have slept more than three hours, she thought as her heart warmed at the effort he had put in for her family.

She hurriedly picked up her fork and took a bite of her breakfast.

"It's really good, Harry!" She exclaimed. Harry could really cook, she thought as she took another bite. Her reaction had made the adults more curious and they hurriedly tried his food.

Jean's eyes had widened when she took a bite. "How can you cook so well?" She demanded. Her bacon was not too oily and her omelette tasted great!

Harry blush a little as he ate his toast. "Practice, Mrs. Granger." He grinned boyishly.

"Jean." She insisted, "I cook almost every day but I don't think my cooking is as nice, Harry."

The blush on his face grew, causing them to smile.

"Thank you. I'm glad that you like it." He added embarrassingly as the adults at the table chuckled at his modesty. Harry was secretly glad that all the cooking at his relative's place had paid off as he watched them savour every bite.

It was rather comical to watch Dan when he took the first bite of Harry's cooking. Dan had immediately dropped his fork, turned sharply to face Harry immediately and asked if he could adopt him. The occupants at the dining table burst into cheery laughter at that reaction before they settled down to enjoy their breakfast.

Since breakfast that day, the Grangers had a good impression of Harry Potter.

“Harry, you still haven’t answered me.” Hermione pouted as she propped herself up from the grassy ground so that she could take a good look at his face. They were lying under the tree as they enjoyed the nice, warm afternoon. It seemed that being around nature and out of the house could tear down the barriers that existed between them. They could talk to each other freely, as they lay in the garden behind the house.

Hermione couldn’t really tell how Harry was feeling since his emerald eyes were hidden at the moment. He had closed his eyes as he stretched under the tree and enjoyed the cool breeze. Harry looked unusually relaxed. She remembered how tense he’d been ever since the he fought Voldemort for the second time. Both of them knew that it was not going to be his last battle and Harry had grown increasingly worried about his friends and his ability to stay alive.

She smiled as she watched him. He looked exactly like how a teenager should look.

The eye lids had sprung open suddenly at the question, revealing those intensely green orbs. She could not decide if the shade of green was as close as that of the greenest leaves of the tree in the morning or the shade of a sparkling emerald.

“What’s the question?” He asked in his velvet voice as he closed his eyes once more. Sunlight was shining slightly through the gaps between the leaves of the tree illuminating the planes of his face. Hermione could not help but admire his rather good looks. Sure, he was not as good looking as Cedric Diggory but with the right diet and exercise, he would be.

“What were you doing during your holidays?” She asked curiously as she gazed at the raven hair guy lying peacefully next to her. His eye lids had shot open in surprise. His emerald eyes revealed hesitation.

She could see his reluctance to share and it had made her even more curious. "The curiosity is killing me, Harry. I told you about mine. Are you going to tell me about yours?" Hermione demanded in a friendly manner. Her chocolate eyes had twinkled with mischief. She could only be this inactive without a book for a little while.

Harry was smiling playfully. "I'm not telling." He added playful as he shot her a look that challenged her to force it out of him.

So, Harry wanted to play?

"One last chance, Harry. Are you sharing?" Hermione threatened in mock annoyance as her chocolate eyes glowed with mischief. Harry was laughing with amusement when he saw that she was rather amused by the game they were playing and he decided to push it.

"Never." He grinned fiercely.

Harry did not expect what happened next. Her fingers had swooped to his sides and had begun mercilessly tickling him. He began laughing as he rolled around on the grass from her punishment. Harry then grabbed her wrists and pulled her to him so that she would fall on him.

With a scream, she collapsed on his body, laughing as she tried to struggle out of his hold to no avail. Harry and Hermione began struggle playfully as Harry tried to flip her from the top to the bottom. Hermione was giggling, her face slightly red from the exhaustion when Harry finally was on top of her.

"I've won. Do you yield and promise not to ask any further?" He asked as he grinned boyishly. His face was inches away from her and he had propped some of his body off her using his elbows so that she had room to breathe. His emerald eyes were shining with pure joy as he stared at her. "Well?" He smiled playfully. He was watching those amused chocolate orbs closely for a reaction. The laughter in her eyes died suddenly and was replaced by an intense longing. Harry found himself holding his breath as she closed distance between them by raising herself towards him slowly.

Her sensuous lips were now just an inch away from his. Harry was so captivated by the moment that he was acting purely by his desire to kiss her.

As if in trance, he leaned in.

When their lips were only half an inch away and his mind began to clear. He couldn't.

The image of a petrified Hermione lying in the hospital bed filled his head. He couldn't protect himself, or needless to say, protect another person. Anyone who was associated with him would be hurt. He couldn't do that to her.

Despite the unbearably strong longing to kiss her, he mustered all his will and strength and pressed her back to the ground as he stood up. His emerald eyes were hardened with determination. Those darn dreams were making his craving for her too strong for his liking.

He should not lead her on if he can't be there for her. Moreover, she liked someone else.

"I am sorry, Hermione."

Truly, the person who could hurt you the most are those who are close to the heart and his rejection cut deep into her heart. He was greeted by a shocked look. As she stood up, the shock in her chocolate orbs were replaced by so much pain from the rejection and it cut Harry deep. Tears had begun to well up as she realised what had taken place.

She turned around and ran away.

What on earth did he just do? Harry felt so torn up by the pain. At that moment, everything fell in place for him and Harry realised that all the reasons were insignificant. All he ever wanted was her to be happy and he chased after Hermione.

Harry had never reaped any benefits from all the bullying until this day. He could easily catch up with the sobbing brown hair girl when

he had sprinted after her and managed to stop her by grabbing one of her arm. Harry pulled her so that she was facing him.

His heart numbed as he saw the tears running down her cheeks. Her chocolate eyes were swollen from the crying and he would blast himself into pieces for causing it, if it would make her feel better. Without thinking, he tenderly wiped the tears off her face with his calloused hands as he looked tenderly at her. "I didn't mean to hurt you that way." He muttered lovingly as he caressed her cheeks. She did not resist his touch and allowed him to continue with his gentle ministrations. How could she allow him to touch her without any resistance and looked at him that way when he hurt her so much? She is just too good for him.

"I'll gladly kiss you if you let me, because I've been dreaming of it for so long. The dreams were the only things that make my life at Dursleys bearable."

Hermione's eyes had widened and he had immediately dropped his hands to his side.

"You have dreams of kissing me?" She asked incredulously as she arched her eyebrows in disbelief. "How long have you started dreaming of me?" She asked as she lowered her head as she blushed.

Harry frowned in confusion. "It started at the beginning of the holidays." Harry answered as he felt blood rushing to his cheeks, colouring them red.

"Strange, I started the same dreams at the same time, too." She muttered. Hermione had frowned in her thought as she bit her bottom lip. Harry couldn't help but chuckle since she was wearing her cute thinking look. It was so Hermione to forget about everything and focus on unravelling a mystery.

Overwhelmed with feelings for his good friend, Harry gently caressed her cheeks adoringly as he looked amorously at her. Those emerald eyes that were shining with adoration took her breath away and Hermione could not think of anything else but him.

"I don't know if this is the right thing to do, Hermione. I don't have the ability to protect you or even love you the way you should be loved." Harry said emotionally. "I want to be noble and push you away, but I can't hurt you. I need you."

"Harry," She whispered tenderly as she stared into those caring emerald eyes that always knew what she wanted. She stood on her toes and kissed his lips was shocked by the slight brushing of her lips against his but it felt right. He wrapped his arms around her petite shoulders and drew her into his embrace as he kissed her back with equal tenderness that made her toes curl.

Unknown to both of them, the moment their lips touched, a blue light enveloped them then it faded away.

Harry had finally broken the kiss but he held her close to him as they enjoyed the quiet moment together. He had never felt so complete before and he revelled in feeling her warm body in his arms. Hermione had laid her head on his chest as she enjoyed the security and the warmth in his embrace. She felt as if she was whole. Harry had filled up the strange void in her heart.

"Harry, does this mean we are together?" Hermione asked quietly.

"Only if you want us to be, Hermione. You know the danger of being with me, don't you?" He smiled as he buried his face in her hair and took in that intoxicating vanilla scent.

"It's no less safe than being your good friend, Harry. I guess it'll be alright." She beamed happily as she made circles on his chest with her finger. Harry laughed at that conclusion. It was very true. Hermione being his girlfriend would not mean that she would become more targeted by everyone who wants him dead. She was already targeted for being his closest friend. "Harry, may I ask why me?" Hermione asked unsurely.

"Why not you, Hermione? You're everything I can ask for a girlfriend and more." He laughed. "Obviously, someone is really the one-eyed

man in the kingdom of blind.” He grinned as Hermione smacked him on his arm as she blushed.

“We need to head back to the house before they start looking for us. I need to start doing my homework.” She said impatiently as she held his hand and dragged him back to the house. Harry was chuckling that he finally had his Hermione back. Something then dawned upon him.

“I’m your distraction? The guy that you liked?” Harry asked sharply. Hermione was staring at him with amusement twinkling in her chocolate eyes. He smacked his forehead.

“I’ve been getting all work up over myself?” He answered incredulously. “Why didn’t you tell me?” He demanded.

“What did you want me to tell you, Harry James Potter? Don’t get jealous because the guy I like is you and not Ron, Neville or Malfoy?” Hermione added impatiently as she folded her arms. It made Harry blush with embarrassment as he lowered his head. “I know you probably finished your work, but I need to do mine and we don’t have all day.” Hermione continued impatiently as she continued to walk towards the house.

“Well, Hermione, I haven’t started too.” He added sheepishly as he lowered his head. I could only think of you.

So I am not alone? Hermione thought happily as she blushed. The emerald eyes had widened in shock. Is something wrong? Hermione thought as she stared at him.

Don’t you realise that we are not talking out loud at all?

It was only then that she realised that Harry did not open his mouth to speak.

We have a mind-link? They thought in unison as they gaped.

Do you know what does this mean, Hermione? Is it normal?

A befuddled expression was on Hermione's face. It was rather disconcerting to know that the brightest witch had no idea regarding it. Well, I'm as new to the Wizarding World as you, Harry. I'm not too sure about magical relationships because I didn't think that I needed to know about it this early, Harry. I've never heard the older students speak of it though. It might mean something. Do you feel any different?

Harry frowned for a moment. Just more alive. I feel so complete having you with me as if you have just filled up a void in my life. I'm quite happy that we can share our thoughts with each other, that way I don't have to guess what you are thinking. He looked sheepishly at her.

I guess I don't have to do that guessing game again. Harry, focus. We're getting near the house. Can you imagine what my parents will think if you kissed me here? She grinned as she walked into the house. She could feel his disappointment, she did too but someone had to be the more level headed one out of the two of them.

Both of them trooped upstairs to their respective rooms to retrieve their writing materials and went to Hermione's room to start on their assignment. There was just an unexplainable desire to be constantly in contact with each other and it was very distracting. Harry and Hermione solved the problem by sitting next to each other, ensuring there was physical contact and they finally had enough concentration to start on their holiday assignments.

Jean, being very concerned with her daughter, had come into the room to check on them. She was glad to see that both of them were concentrating on their work, finishing up their assignments. Hermione was obviously more at peace since her good friend was with her. They looked rather cute together, she thought as she observed.

"Hermione, do you have to write that much?" He asked incredulously as he stared at the huge roll of parchment that was her History assignment. He remembered that Professor Bins had only asked for 6 inch essay. She had probably written nearly twice the length. He was very satisfied of the length of his essay. It was already quite long yet Hermione had beaten him in terms of length again.

Hermione grinned brightly and focused her attention on her essay. They were on their last assignment. Harry grinned as he focused his attention on his transfiguration essay.

After a while, Hermione could no longer bear with Harry's theft of ideas. "No copying, Harry." Hermione warned when she realised that Harry had used some of the ideas that she had briefly thought of.

He wore an innocent look on his face. "I didn't."

"You shouldn't pick the ideas from my head, Harry." She growled in mock anger as she mock glared at him. Harry was still pretending to be innocent.

"I did not look over at your work and copied it, Hermione."

"Of course you didn't. You picked it out of my head, instead." Hermione grinned when she realised that Harry was having a difficult time to stop himself from laughing.

"It was in my head, too, you know." He laughed lightly as he pecked her lips gently.

"You could always choose not to use them, Harry James Potter." Hermione grinned brightly.

"You can check my essay. I took the brief ideas you had and developed them on my own. I'm not exactly copying from you, Hermione." Harry grinned rakishly as he laughed.

Hermione leaned over and checked and realised that it was true. "Real sneaky, Potter. You should be in Slytherin for this." She grinned as she laid her head on his shoulder.

"You should've been in Ravenclaw for being so smart. Look at these." He said with an exaggerated tone as he pointed to all her extremely long, rolled up parchments and earned a playful slap on the arm by her as he laughed.

"The sorting hat wanted to place me in that house but it decided not to because I can only be complete by being in Gryffindor." She added as she closed her eyes and enjoyed his warmth.

"The sorting hat wanted to place me in Slytherin but it decided to place me in Gryffindor because I can become whole there." He added as he shrugged. "I'm glad that he put me in here though." He smiled tenderly as he wrapped his hand around her waist.

Hermione immediately lifted her head from his shoulder and pulled his hand away from her. "My parents, Harry. Unless you want to do some explaining to them about why your arms are around their princess."

"I don't know. Do you want them to know about it? I'm fine with telling your parents about it since its not exactly bad thing." He added nonchalantly. "I do know that it means that we have decided to be serious about it." It was definitely not a bad thing for Harry. He just simply could not see having anyone but Hermione with him in the future.

"Well, we've only been dating for a few hours. I don't really want my parents to start checking on us as if we are going to bring up the relationship so soon. I guess it is alright that we don't tell them for the moment." Hermione said after she considered the issue. "I don't see having anyone but you with me in the future either, Harry." She smiled as she blushed. Harry beamed brightly as he gently kissed her forehead.

"I think it's around dinner time. We have to head down before one of them comes up to look for us." Hermione added with a smile as she stood up and stretched. The entire afternoon had swiftly flown past because they were so busy with their holiday homework. "I'll show you around the neighbourhood later, dear." Hermione smiled as she walked out of her room.

Harry could not take his eyes off the unconscious way his girlfriend had sway her hips as she walked out of the room. He could feel all his blood going south at the sight and he had to think of something else lest Hermione 'hears' it. Harry groaned, stood up, and followed

her to the kitchen. Sweet Merlin, he is going to have a tough time taking his eyes off her later.

There was a stark difference between the last dinner and this dinner. It was more lively and comfortable as the teenagers shared stories from school - of course they'd left out anything that was remotely dangerous. Hermione had never told her parents that a Basilisk was loose in school, petrifying several students including her. Harry would never bring it up because it was too painful for him to remember the sight of the ghostly pale, stiff, and unmoving Hermione.

"Harry, how did you spend your holiday?" Dan asked friendly as he finished his fill. Harry was speechless when he tried to find something remotely light to talk about. There was none when it came to staying at his Uncle's house. Hermione had a glance at some of his holiday as he recalled them briefly through their mind-link and she had dropped her cutlery in shock.

You can't be serious, Harry. They locked you up in your room and only allowed you out to do chores? She was feeling outraged. How could they treat you that way?

It is really nothing, Hermione. They used to do worse. Harry had made a point not to think about all the images of the past so that she would not see it.

"Well, just doing housework, I suppose, Mr. Granger. I really love your cooking, Mrs. Granger." He added when he took a bite of his food.

The adults had frowned at the obvious attempt of Harry changing the subject. Jean had even placed her cutlery down on the table and looked at the guest. "Housework all the time, Harry?" Jean asked quietly.

"Well," He answered as he scratched the back of his neck as he pondered over what he ought to say, "Not all the time, they did allow me to return to my room." He stared at his plate. He did not want to see how they had reacted.

It suddenly occurred to him that this was the only set of Muggle clothes he had that was presentable to meet Hermione's family. The rest were hand downs from Dudley when he was much younger since Dudley was slightly bigger than Harry many years ago and they were in bad condition. It was fine to wear underneath his robes but it was not suitable to be worn to meet others.

Apparently, Hermione had heard his thought and she had answered with her thought. I'll ask Daddy to take us shopping later, Harry. It is nothing to be embarrassed about. It should be your relatives who should be ashamed for treating you that way. He was washed by her sincerity and tenderness to the point that tears were beginning to form in his eyes. He held back his tears with all his determination.

Hermione was all he could manage. She understood and held his hand comfortingly under the dining table.

"Well, I hope you will enjoy your stay with us, Harry. Harry, you are such a good boy. You're welcome to stay over during the holidays if you want to in the future. I can see that Hermione appreciates your company." Jean added tenderly as she looked at the raven-haired guy sitting quietly at the table.

He took a great deal of determination from preventing the floodgates to be opened by that sincere statement. "Excuse me for a moment." Harry added as he stood up and went to the toilet to calm down.

Hermione was staring with deep concern at her retreating boyfriend's took the opportunity to bring up the issue of clothing with her parents and had left out the point that he did not have any more fitting clothing to wear. They had agreed heartily.

Hermione knew from the emotional and mind link that they have shared that Harry was simply too touched by their gestures and she made up her mind to make it up to him in every way possible. He finally came back, his emotions in control as he participated in the conversation actively and soon all of them finished their meal and headed out to shop.

The Grangers had brought Harry to a mall nearby to do his shopping. Harry had never been to the shopping mall in his entire life and was fascinated by all the crowds of people and the displays in the shops of the building. He had only been to the town's market to pick up groceries for his relatives and that was nothing compared to this place. They brought Harry to the section that sold clothes for men.

Jean and Hermione had fun selecting clothes for him, ranging from shirts to bottoms, and finally boxers. Harry had teased Hermione by parading like a model and she laughed at his poor imitation. They had even included swimwear since they had the intention to bring all of them swimming. Harry was blushing when he came out of the changing room only clad in black swimming trunks. Hermione realised how scrawny her boyfriend was. She did not even notice that Harry had made a great effort to keep his back away from them when he came out and went back into the changing room. Two years of proper nutrition was scarcely enough to hide the fact that he was underfed for a great portion of his life. Her heart had ached.

Jean and Dan had noticed her daughter's expression and said nothing. They had to hide their emotions from seeing how undernourished he was.

When they finally decided on everything and was about to pay for the clothes, Harry realised that he only had galleons.

"I didn't bring any money with me. All the money I have is in wizard's currency." Harry added sheepishly as he lowered his head. He disliked imposing on his host. "Is it alright that I borrow the money from you now and pay you back later?" He asked.

"It is alright. You can take it as a gift from both of us, Harry." Dan said with a smile.

Harry was sincerely touched by their gesture, but he could not accept it. He insisted on borrowing money to pay for his clothes. "Thank you, but I can't impose you that way. You've already given me a roof and food without asking anything from me, the least I could do is pay for my own clothes. I appreciate your generosity, but I can't accept it."

Jean and Dan looked at each other, and then they finally acceded to his request and gave him the receipt as he took his shopping bags.

I can't wait to burn Dudley's second hands. A silly grin was plastered on his face when he looked at his unusually quiet girlfriend while they were walking out of the departmental store towards the car. Hermione? He could feel that she was furious but he had no idea why so he asked.

I can't imagine how your relatives treated you when you were young, Harry. Hermione thought in an upset tone.

His emerald eyes had softened with love as he stared at her. Hermione.

Harry, why did you tell anyone? They could have stopped this! I knew they were horrible to you but not this horrible. They didn't feed you enough, right? Two years of balanced food is not enough to mask the fact that you were undernourished for nearly a decade! Why do you even need to return to them? They make you work like a slave and lock you up in your room when you are not needed. Hermione had literally shrieked the thought in her chocolate eyes which had narrowed with anger and frustration at his relatives' treatment. He would've smiled because he now had a person who cared enough about him to be angry when he is mistreated but he could feel the excess magic flowing from her, causing the air to be magically charged. It felt as if an explosion might take place soon. Harry realised that Hermione was about to use accidental magic so he had to stop her because there were other people around.

"Hermione," He said sharply as he shook her. "Stop it. You might hurt someone. Take a deep breath." He commanded firmly.

Hermione did as he had instructed and began to cool down.

"Harry, what did Hermione do?" Jean asked as she rushed forward to check. Dan had already walked to the car and did not notice. Hermione was fine but she looked a bit embarrassed that she nearly had a magical outburst.

"She got too angry and nearly used accidental magic. It could have hurt someone but she stopped when she realized it." He added calmly as he looked at Hermione worriedly. He knew that she was usually very calm and composed. It was the first time he had ever saw her fired up this bad.

"What made you lose your temper, sweetheart? You don't usually flare up." Jean asked her gently as she looked at her daughter with deep concern.

"Nothing, mummy." Hermione lowered her head. She did not want to make Harry uncomfortable.

He could tell from the look of Hermione's face that she did not like to keep things from her mother but she did not want him to feel uncomfortable so he had solved the problem by telling Jean himself.

"I'll say it, Hermione. Hermione was outraged at my relatives' treatment of me. She had just guessed that they did not feed me enough." Harry answered as he looked at Hermione affectionately. "It's in the past. I'm alright." He added firmly, closing the subject firmly as he walked to the car where Dan was waiting, leaving mother and daughter to talk it out.

"Sweetheart, I know you're upset. I was too, when I realised he was so thin. He had dropped so many hints about it at dinner time. We can only help him by treating him right." Jean muttered as she hugged her daughter. "Let's go and join them lest they think we went missing, dear."

It was still rather early in the evening when they returned home so Hermione dragged Harry out to introduce him to the neighbourhood as she'd promised, while her parents head up to do their reading.

It was a rather cool night and they were holding their hands as they strolled quietly down the lane, enjoying each other's presence. "Harry, why did you choose to return when they treat you so badly?" She asked with deep concern as she tugged an offending fringe back behind her ear.

He smiled at how dogged Hermione could be when she was determined in finding out something. "I have no other places to go. They're my only living relatives." Harry answered before changing the subject. "I now know why you're such a brilliant person, Hermione. You have such wonderful parents. You deserve nothing less." He beamed softly as he entwined his fingers intimately with her fingers and brought her hand to his lips. He brushed his lips tenderly on her knuckle, causing Hermione to blush.

"Harry, you're brilliant yourself. You care deeply for others and you don't judge. I know that you'd give up your life without a thought if you knew you could save your friends. No one has the right to treat you badly." She muttered softly as he blushed. Hermione had a need to kiss him, satisfied that no one was watching she tried to stand on her toes.

However, Harry gently pressed her on the ground, stopping her from doing so. Her chocolate eyes had widened in shock.

His emerald eyes had softened with love as he whispered, "Allow me, love." He tipped her head slightly with a hand as she wrapped her arms around his body. He leaned closer to her and gently captured her lips with his. The tender kiss had communicated the love they had for each other and it was so sweet, it made her toes curl. When they had finally stopped kissing and rested their heads on each other's shoulder, Harry tenderly whispered the one statement he thought he would never say to another.

"I love you, Hermione Jane Granger." He muttered softly into her ear.

Overwhelmed by her feelings for him, Hermione had whispered tenderly to him. "I love you too, Harry James Potter."

A/N: Thank you for all the reviews. I felt that Harry and Hermione have their issues that would stand in their way of their relationship hence the need for the first chapter. I cut the chase and got them together but they are in for some shock next the chapter, Harry is more studious in this story so it is a big shock that he didn't complete his assignments when he had the chance to. Continue to review please.

Chapter 3

Surprise!

Beta-read by frustr8dwriter

Neither of them could sleep that night when they had both quietly retreated to their respective rooms. Harry and Hermione just had an overpowering need to be close to each other to the point that it hurt being apart. Harry tossed to his side for like the millionth time on his large comfortable bed. He could feel from his mind-link with Hermione that she was having difficulty falling asleep too.

What changed that they could no longer sleep by themselves? Harry mused as he lay flat on his back and looked at the ceiling. He was not surprised to hear Hermione's voice in his head.

I don't know. After the kiss in the afternoon, a lot of strange things have been happening, don't you think?

Yes, first it was our mind-link and then there was the incident at the mall. I didn't think you had so much raw power yet you exuded so much today that it charged the air around us as if an explosion was about to take place. Harry thought.

That is true. I feel as though I've got a lot more power in me, Hermione admitted. I have no idea what's happening to us and it terrified me. I've never heard of a kiss giving additional powers before. It's just not usual.

Well, I haven't got a clue on what is normal for relationships. Harry declared.

Harry could feel her mood lightened up, no doubt laughing at his last comment.

Harry, is it even normal to miss someone who's just several rooms away from you?

Harry chortled at that statement.

I know what you mean, dear. I miss you so much. As much as I love hearing your thoughts, you can't be thinking and sleeping at the same time, love. I'll see you in a few hours time.

Goodnight.

The young couple did not get an ounce of sleep. In addition to their tiredness, they felt very weak as though they'd just fought a draining magical battle the night before. Hermione and Harry both trudged slowly and sleepily to the dining table where Jean had already prepared the breakfast. Despite feeling so weary, Harry hurried to help her with the setting the table, serving of food, and cleaning up, as he was accustomed to doing all these tasks after greeting her. Seeing the determination in those green eyes, Jean had no choice but allow him to help.

On this particular morning, they were having pancakes with blueberry sauce. Everything was ready when Dan had arrived at the table last. "Good morning dear," Dan smiled as he kissed his wife on the cheek. "Good morning, princess." He beamed as he kissed Hermione's cheeks. "Good morning, Harry." He beamed at Harry before settling at his seat at the table. The two females in the kitchen returned the greeting warmly.

It felt really like a family, Harry thought as he looked around the table and watched the way the Grangers treated each other affectionately. It was sweet seeing them together. The only time had seen a family together was when he was staying at the Burrow. It was chaotic and loud during mealtimes at the Burrow, a huge contrast to meal times in the Granger's household. Everyone had finished their breakfast and was sipping their coffee when the sound of flapping wings disrupted the peaceful morning.

Suddenly, three owls had flown into the kitchen.

Two regal-looking owls dropped the two letters on Harry's lap and Hermione had received a letter in a similar fashion by the last one. As abrupt as they came, they had left.

The older Grangers were a bit shaken since they were unaccustomed to the way Wizards received their mail while the two teenagers were looking at their letters with deep interest.

“What do you think this is all about?” Hermione asked curiously when she realised that the letter she was holding was identical to one that Harry had opened to read, except that his was addressed to “Lord Potter.” He found two parchments inside. He took the one that looked like a letter and began to read.

Dear Lord Potter,

Congratulations on your marriage to Miss Hermione Granger that took place yesterday. Under the Soul Bond Act, Chapter 12, we wish to inform you that you are hereby an emancipated minor. As the Last Scion of the Ancient and Noble House, you are named Lord of the Ancient and Noble House of Potter and you are liable to claim all rights, properties and titles that go with the position of being the Head of the Ancient and Noble House of Potter.

I wish your marriage a success.

Yours Faithfully,

The Ministry of Records

His emerald eyes had widened in shock that he was now married to Hermione. He hurried took out the second parchment. It was their marriage certificate. They were officially married in the wizard's world! Hermione had paled when she caught sight of the wedding certificate. Her chocolate eyes had widened in shock as she stared at it.

The reactions of the teenagers had caught the attention of the adults. They had glanced over to see the cause of their surprise.

There was an uncomfortable silence in the kitchen for a moment.

"What do you mean by marriage? How on earth did both of you get married?" Dan asked shakily when he found his voice. Jean was merely speechless when she stared at the two bewildered youths sitting around the table. It was obvious that they had no idea that they were married.

When Hermione had recovered from the surprise, she had suddenly taken the unopened letter and bolted upstairs to her room.

Harry could feel a mixture of emotions that did not belong to him. The most prominent one was disappointment. Hermione was obviously feeling disappointed but she had blanked out her mind, preventing him from reading the cause of it.

"Mr. and Mrs. Granger, would you please give us a moment? Excuse me." He added as he dashed after her. Worried about how she was taking their sudden marriage, he bolted after her, leaving the adults in the room without hearing an answer.

"Open the door, Hermione." Harry asked worriedly as he knocked on her door loudly. He could feel her regret and it was getting to him. Was the marriage such a bad thing for her? "Hermione, please open the door. We can solve this thing together."

Don't lock me out, Hermione, please.

He heard a loud click, signalling that she had unlocked her door and was allowing him in. Harry felt a moment of relief washing through him as he pushed open the door to see Hermione sitting on the bed with a solemn face as she laid the opened letter next to her. He could see that it was addressed to "Lady Potter".

"Are you truly unhappy about the marriage?" He asked with an emotionless tone as he stared at the brown hair girl sitting on the bed.

"Oh no, Harry. How could you think that way?" She said with a shrill voice. "I'm happy that we are married but I wish it didn't happen this way." Hermione added as her tone softened a bit.

I hoped to go through the process of courtship, proposal, and preparation for marriage, yet we have just skipped everything.

Harry's mood had lightened considerably when he knew that she did not regret that she was married to him but his heart had ached when he realised how much it meant to her to go through the process naturally. He didn't know much about girls but he knew that this was important to them.

Harry sat next to her on her bed as he took her hand into his firmly. "We will have a wedding, announcing to all our family and friends that we are married." He answered as he took her hand. "I know we only started dating for a day, but I've felt as if I've known you all my life since first day I met you. When you pushed the door of the compartment open and introduced yourself, I could feel a connection." Harry smiled. He would make it up for her somehow.

"I feel the same way, too." Hermione admitted with a smile.

Connection, mind-link, soul bond, she mused thoughtfully. "Wait, Soul Bond Act? Does this mean that we have a soul bond and we finalised it?" Hermione asked as her eyes widened in shock.

Harry still had a confused look on his face. "What is a soul bond?"

"All I know is that it's very rare. It's like a match made in heaven kind of thing. Other than that, I don't have a clue what it means." She added disappointedly with a frown as she thought. Suddenly, an idea came to her and she brightened a little, "Didn't you receive another letter? What was it all about?"

Harry took the letter out from his pocket. It was a financial statement of his assets and a list of his holdings. He whistled at the figures. His family was rolling in money. He did not have to worry about not being able to support his family. There was another letter attached to it, asking him to make an appointment to discuss his family account since he was now Head.

"Lord Potter huh, you're now considered an adult. This means that you can start using magic outside of school." She said excitedly.

“My lady, you’re also an adult. You can do the same.” He added as he smiled cheekily.

He suddenly recalled the situation they had escaped from.

“How should we explain? Mr. Granger was furious and we don’t have an answer to his questions!” Harry exclaimed.

It was at this point of time when another owl had come in. It had a parcel and a letter addressed to “Mr. Harry Potter”. The handwriting was unfamiliar and he had no inkling who could have written him. His curiosity about the contents of the letter got the better of him so he took it out and read it, forgetting all about Hermione’s parents.

Dear Harry,

I am the Creator and I created the Magical World. If you have received this letter, it means that you have already completed the soul-bonding process with Miss Hermione Granger or now formally known as Mrs. Hermione Potter. According to the Magical law, you are now considered married. I have a book that can guide the both of you on what is happening and it can be found in your parcel.

I would like to get to the main point of the letter. I have the gift of seeing the future. The future without your wife was a harsh and devastating one. Although you survived the coming battle physically, you lost many who were close to you and never recovered emotionally from the final battle to make an even bigger impact on the magical world the way you were destined to be. If you are able to complete what you were meant to do, the chaos in the Magical World will end in your generation.

To celebrate this special union and to aid you in your upcoming tasks, I would like to present the both of you with two gifts and some advice. The first gift is a pair of wedding bands I have created especially for you. Much like a wand, these rings are designed to control the ancient powers that you will unlock with the finalisation of your bond.

However, the rings have an added feature -The Gift of Languages, enabling both you and your wife to speak to all animals and in all languages. There are other features of the rings that you can explore but I must caution you to be discreet. These objects are rare and you don't want to attract unwanted attention.

The next gift is actually my house. I lived in this house during the time when Wizards had no place to hide from the persecution from non-magical people. It looks like a normal glass bottle with a miniature house in it. I would like to give this house to you. It will only allow the two of you to enter, thus no one would be able to find you if you decided to hide in it. Time travels very slowly within the house and you will never age. Most would love to have the opportunity to enter the house. In this house, there will someone to teach you. You will both be required to begin training after your thirteenth birthday. You need wear your rings in order to enter the House.

Finally, I would like to give you some tasks and advice. You and Hermione are to complete your magical education as soon as possible with the help of the House. Take your O.W.L.s in your third year and N.E. in your fifth. This is to ensure that you have a good grasp of magical theories before your fight with a full-grown wizard as well as give you time to master other abilities.

Keep your true friends close to you. You will be surprised to find jewels in the most unlikely people. Always stay vigilant against all, even with those who call themselves your allies. Remember to have fun, you are still a teenage boy and Hermione needs to have a normal life, too. Never forget the reason why you are fighting this battle, it will help to give you the strength and the power to overcome all your difficulties. Finally, I wish that you and Hermione have a blissful marriage.

Make good use of my gifts,

The Creator

Harry immediately set the letter aside and took the parcel. He may have been bad at History but even he knew who the Creator was. Harry decided to hide the small wooden gift box containing the rings in his pocket and proceeded to take out a rather old tome and passed it to Hermione. "Hermione, this is a guide to Soul Bonds. It will help us to understand and guide us."

Hermione excitedly took it and began reading the introduction to the soul bond. She finally understood why she and Harry always felt so connected, why they began having dreams of each other recently, and why they had an uncontrollable need to be physically near each other.

"I didn't know that a kiss could finalise the bond and that from now on we can't be apart until our magical cores are fully merged or we'll be in danger of losing our magic or even our lives. I see why it is considered a marriage in the wizard world." Hermione shared as she read with great fascination.

"Well, that explains a great deal why we were both feeling quite weak this morning." Harry answered as he helped to place a stray brown fringe behind her ear tenderly. Hermione smiled at the affectionate gesture. "I think we need to head down to explain to your parents before they start bouncing off the walls. They probably don't like me that much right now." Harry said as he took the hand of his wife and urged her to place the book aside.

She hurriedly marked the page that she was reading and followed him down, her hand in his.

Dan and Jean were in a quiet discussion when they had entered the kitchen. Harry could tell from their sombre expressions that they were rather upset about the news.

"Sorry, Daddy and Mummy, Harry just received a letter that explains the situation a bit more. We are ready to explain everything." Hermione said as they both took a seat.

"We are now recognised as a married couple in the Wizard world because of the finalisation of our soul bond yesterday. We had no

idea about it until we received the announcement via the letter. Apparently there is a law that considers all soul bonds as marriages because it would be more convenient for the bonded couples. It's really like a match made in heaven and Harry is the other half of me." Hermione smiled as she affectionately glanced at the guy sitting quietly next to her.

"Sweetheart, you are barely fourteen. How can Harry support you and take care of you? Marriage is not a game; it takes time and effort to make it work." Dan declared with frustration.

"Sir, I am more than able to support Hermione financially for the rest of our lives. Since I'm now recognised as an adult in the Wizarding World, I have come into the Potter fortune. I would never let her starve. I am also more than willing to put the effort and the time to make it work. I love her. She has always been a part of me." Harry added tenderly when he cast a lovingly side-glance at his wife.

"Besides, Daddy, now that we have finalised the bond we can't be apart or we will die. We are too linked - our souls, minds and magical cores are now entwined with each other. We can't live without the other." Hermione added as she looked at their reactions.

The two parents looked at each other and sighed. Both of them thought they had more time to spend with their daughter. They should have realised that since the day that Hermione received a letter stating that she was witch, she no longer belonged to their world.

"Mr. and Mrs. Granger, I know it's too late to ask this. It means so much to us that we have your blessings for our union. Would you give us your blessings?" Harry asked as voice rang with sincerity.

Dan looked at the earnest boy sitting in front of him. He knew nothing much about him and was reluctant to give his only daughter to him but they were already married, Harry did not need to ask for their blessings to be together. He admired the young boy's efforts in trying to give his daughter a resemblance of a normal wedding.

He looked at his wife for support. She had dipped her head and so he nodded and the two teenagers beamed.

“Both your mum and I support this union. I think you should stop calling me Mr. Granger since you’re now my son-in-law.” Dan added gruffly. Hermione squealed excitedly and kissed her father on the cheek happily as a small smile broke out on his lips.

“Try Daddy, my love.” Hermione answered as she beamed at her husband.

“Thank you, Dad and mum.” Harry answered with emotion choked voice. He had a family.

“Welcome to the family, Harry.” Jean smiled as she hugged him tenderly. She did not like the idea that her daughter was married so early but she was glad that she had married the right person no matter how odd the circumstances were.

“Welcome to the family, Harry.” Dan added from the side as he looked at his happy daughter.

Hermione was smiling when she felt his overwhelming emotions. He was very happy that he finally had a family and she had nearly wept when she felt them. Having a family meant so much to him.

“Is it okay if we go to Diagon Alley today? We need to settle some matters now that Hermione is my wife. We need to stop at Gringotts.” Harry grinned happily, his emerald eyes twinkling with delight as he held the Hermione’s hand. They had agreed to take them since they had no plans for the day.

Harry and Hermione quickly made it into Gringotts for fear of others recognising him. They had left the Grangers in famous Wizarding pub, ‘The Leaky Cauldron’.

He knew from the letter that he would be fighting his nemesis once again and it didn’t do them any good if many knew about their activities.

It had suddenly occurred to him that he was putting Hermione and Hermione’s family in greater danger now that he had married her. He

had to think of ways to protect his new family since he knew he would not have a lot of time to prepare to face Voldemort again. He had to show her the letter soon.

Harry and Hermione were led in to meet with Griphook, his financial advisor for the Potter accounts, and had squared up the account after he gave Hermione a key to Harry's vault. They had also received the Head of the Potter family's rings.

"By any chance, is there a way that I can spend money in Muggle World without converting large amount of Wizard currency to their currency?"

"Your Lordship, we have a Muggle credit card that belongs to a prestigious bank that is connected to your account. Since Potter is a very old family name, both renown in Muggle world and Wizarding one, you do have a Muggle account that is rather substantial."

"Please call me Harry. May I give Hermione access to the account?" He asked politely. Griphook blinked at how courteous Harry was to him. It was uncommon that wizard was so respectful to a Goblin.

"Yes, of course." He answered as he presented Hermione with a debit card that had unlimited credit. He had also given them two bottomless money bags and a wallet charmed to be only opened by them for a fee. In the event that any of the items were lost, they would magically return back to the owner.

"I will like to make a withdrawal from my vault and I believe there are items in them that I will need to see?" He requested, vaguely recalling the letter stating there were.

"Oh yes, I have the list right here." He presented Harry with the list of items in the Potter family vault.

He took a quick glanced. There were his parent's journals along with other books, jewellery, dress robes, armours, and even weapons. "Thank you. Would you mind leading us to the vault?"

Harry had took a rather large sum of gold from his vaults as he picked up the two journals and had converted a fair bit of galleons into pounds to pay his father-in-law back and to finance the grand plan he was hatching at the moment. He had to think of a way to get his wife out of the way. Hermione had merely arched her eyebrow at the amount he was carrying and had frowned when she finally realised that he had constructed a mental wall between them.

“Harry, are you hiding something from me?” Hermione asked suspiciously.

“Let’s meet your parents for lunch first. I’m starving.” He smiled weakly as he guided his wife out of the bank to meet the Grangers.

Harry was worried about how he was going to get the time to be alone with his in-laws to inform them of his plan when Hermione had excused herself to go to the ladies room.

“Dad and Mum, I need some help in planning a quiet wedding. I know it is unfair to all of you that we find ourselves married in such a way. I really want to give her something that resembles one as soon as possible. I want to throw a grand wedding for her when we are older to make it up to her since we can’t really get married at this age in the non-magical world. Besides, I don’t want the news of our wedding to be known to everyone yet. What do you think?” Harry asked as they all leaned in to discuss what Harry wanted. He managed to pass Jean a mixture of Wizard currency and pounds when he spotted his wife coming towards them. They had all hurriedly put on emotionless expressions when Hermione returned.

Harry had to start the ball rolling. Step one, getting his too-intelligent wife out of the picture.

“Dear, I think I have some matters to settle as Head of the family. Is it all right to have only Mum to accompany you for the rest of the day? I gave mum some floo powder so both of you can go home later if you wish.”

Hermione looked at her husband suspiciously with those brown eyes then conceded when Jean had asked if she wanted to go to the

bookstore for books. Hermione agreed, shooting her father and husband an apprehensive look before heading out with her mother.

"Do you think she knows what we are planning?" Harry asked his father-in-law.

Dan shrugged.

Harry gave a sigh of relief. His wife was too intelligent to hide anything from her. He was now free to go to the next step, which is getting his clothes.

"Well, Dad. I need to pick up a suit first. I'm not too sure what to pick so I'm going need your help." Harry asked shyly. He had never bought a suit before and needed a second opinion. He nodded his head and both of them went to the Muggle London to purchase their clothes. Dan, being a professional, gave Harry a lot of tips in getting a perfect suit, and they finally selected a simple tuxedo for the occasion. Harry paid for the clothes and the shoes that went along with it.

"I'll floo to your house later. You needed to get something else right?" Harry asked, vaguely recalling that his father-in-law wanted to get a wedding gift for his daughter.

"Yes. It is customary for the father to get the daughter something for her wedding. I think I will look for accessories that could go with dress. What kind of ring did you get for her?"

Harry was glad that he had the foresight to bring his rings with him. He searched his pocket and fished out an elegant small wooden box. He opened it, revealing two simple gold bands with "H J Potter" engraved on it. It was quite stylish despite its simplicity.

"Very well, it makes things easier. I will head home later to help you with the decorations after I hire a professional photographer to take some shots. See you later." Dan answered as he walked down the street looking for a jewellery shop.

Harry was now down to a few last steps. He needed to inform the guests. Harry walked back to Diagon Alley. He had a problem. How

was he going to finish the decorations and invite Dumbledore and McGonagall by that evening? Suddenly an idea popped into his mind. He could call Dobby for help.

"Dobby, could you meet me please?" Harry hoped that it would work. To his relief, he heard that familiar crack and Dobby had appeared. He looked happier than the last time he saw him. Freedom seemed to agree with the house elf.

"The Great Harry Potter is calling Dobby?" Dobby asked happily as he looked at the young wizard.

"Yes. I need your help. I'm going to have a simple wedding in the Grangers' garden and I have to invite Dumbledore and McGonagall to perform the ceremony and attend too. Is there any way you can take me to meet them?"

Dobby started to beam even wider when he realised that Harry wanted him to help.

"Dobby is proud Great Harry Potter need Dobby's help. Dobby will take Harry Potter to Dumbledore." He happily said. Without a warning, he took Harry's hand and they had appeared in Dumbledore's office. Harry was always in the Headmaster's office since he was always getting into trouble. He could recognise the place at first glance and turned towards the direction of the table to look at the Headmaster.

The wizard with long silver hair was sitting at his table, reading a document when he heard a loud 'crack'. Suddenly, Harry Potter and a house elf had appeared before him. He was taken aback because he did not expect visitors to come by this manner.

"Harry?" He asked as he adjusted his half-moon spectacles. Wasn't he supposed to be at his relative's house?

"Good afternoon, Professor. I'm here to invite you to witness a joining ceremony between Hermione and me today. I know it is a little rash but we only received the letter today, stating that we are officially married under the Soul Bond Act. Can you come and preside over

the ceremony?" Harry asked as he looked at the wizard with a grandfatherly disposition.

"Soul bond? You and Hermione have finalised your bond?" Dumbledore asked in surprise. He had heard that Harry had a soul mate since a name had appeared next his in the records but no one had any idea who the soul mate was because the information was kept confidential. Dumbledore hurriedly checked his records and realised that Hermione's name had changed. It was now Hermione Jane Potter.

"Yes. We only realised it today. I wanted it to be low key so I will be only inviting you and Professor McGonagall to it since you both would've already been informed of our marriage." Harry smiled as he pointed to the Hogwarts Records.

"How wise of you, Harry. Very well, I will inform Professor McGonagall of the invitation. I will be happy preside over the ceremony." Dumbledore added as his eyes twinkled.

"I have another matter that I wish to discuss with you. Is it all right that our marriage remains a secret? I don't want anyone to know about it until we are much older. We will throw a formal wedding to inform everyone else when we are ready." Harry answered.

"We respect your decision. What time do you expect us to be there?" Dumbledore added as he looked at the young boy.

"The Granger's residence at 1650 hours." He grinned. "I've got to run. Do I need to arrange a dinner for both of you?" He asked, as he looked the Headmaster.

"No, we'll have sufficient time to come back to Hogwarts to eat with the staff. We will meet you later." Dumbledore smiled. Harry smiled and nodded to Dobby. Dobby took his hand once again and they disappeared.

Hermione, one of the smartest witches he had ever seen, bonding with Harry Potter. Dumbledore thought as he beamed brightly. The

Wizarding World now has some hope against the impending darkness.

Time to inform McGonagall. He threw some floo powder into the fireplace and called for McGonagall.

It was already two in the afternoon when Harry Dobby had arrived in the Grangers' garden and began to decorate. He had no idea how to proceed and was glad that Dobby knew what he was doing.

He conjured a simple arch decorated with roses on a platform under the trees where they had finalised the bond. Harry initially only wanted the shade from the tree and it was only after Dobby had constructed the temporary platform and created the arch, that he realised it was the same spot where he and Hermione had first kissed and completed the bond. He could imagine the picture of them exchanging their vows and rings under the arch with the trees shading them.

Dobby then added a white carpet. He conjured four chairs embellished with flowers and placed two on both side of the carpet to finish it. Dobby also conjured pillars with roses wrapped around them and placed them on both sides of the white carpet alongside the chairs. It was enough for a simple wedding with only three people attending.

They were standing at the garden admiring the decorations when Harry heard Dan walking towards him.

Dan arrived home and he was shocked to see that everything was done. It was only three in the afternoon. "I've spoken to them. They are finishing up at the shop, getting their hair done for a dinner tonight. Jean had told Hermione that they were dressing up for a dinner. Who's this?" Dan asked as he looked at the small house elf.

"This is my friend Dobby. He's a house elf. Dobby, this is my father-in-law, Hermione's father, Dan Granger." Harry introduced.

To their surprise, Dobby started weeping.

"Great Harry Potter called Dobby his friend? Harry Potter is a great wizard. Wizards never treat house elf as equal." It was then when Dan realised why he was crying.

"Thank you for helping Harry and Hermione by decorating the place. It's very beautiful." Dan smiled warmly.

Dobby started to weep harder. Harry decided it was more prudent to leave the elf to cry as he turned his attention to other matters. "Harry, I have already booked a limousine as you have requested to pick us up for dinner at six and a reservation has been made for the dinner." Dan added as he smiled. "The ladies should be reaching home soon. I told Jean to take Hermione up to her room immediately so she won't see what we've done. It should be no problem since she's aware of the special dinner we're having."

"Dad, I have invited two other guests, but they will be heading back to Hogwarts for their dinner." Harry beamed. It would be the first time they would be having dinner together outside.

"I'll be heading in to dress up." Harry announced. Dan was glad that everything was turning out right but he felt a bit sad that he had to give the hand of his daughter away later.

As Harry headed to the house he turned to the house elf. "Dobby, thank you again for all your help. Where are you staying at the moment?" Harry asked.

Dobby looked rather uncomfortable. "Dobby has nowhere to go because no one wants to employ free Dobby. "

Harry smiled. "I will hire you since I am now Lord Potter. Would you be willing to work for me? I'll give you 3 galleons every week and a day off." Harry smiled.

Dobby was overjoyed. "Dobby willing to work for Great Harry Potter. Thank you, master Harry Potter."

"Dobby, call me Harry. I'll be going to get dressed up. Please check out the Potter's residences and see if there is anything to do because

I don't think I will bet the chance to visit the houses anytime soon. I'll call you if I need help but do stay until the ceremony is over." Harry smiled warmly.

"Mast-Harry treats Dobby very well." Dobby looked as if he was on the verge of crying again and Harry decided to leave the house elf to himself since he had no idea how to deal with a crying house elf.

It was already four fifty. It was time for the final surprise. Hermione had finished dressing up when she heard a knock on the door. She could barely recognise herself after the make-up and the change of hairdo. Her usually bushy hair was straightened and made into stylish brown ringlets that dangled from the crown of her head. The rest of her hair was twirled sleekly on her head. She checked her appearance again before standing up and getting the door. It was her father.

"Daddy, you look really handsome." Hermione admired as she watched her father enter her room. He was wearing a simple white tuxedo with black bottoms and his black hair, which was starting to have a grey tinge to it, was gelled backwards neatly. "Where are we going to have dinner? We're really dressed up for it." She smiled.

I wonder how Harry looks.

He chuckled as he sat next to his daughter.

"While you and your mum were out, I took the liberty of getting this for you. After all, you've just gotten married." Dan smiled as he took the opened the velvet box and nestling on the cushion was a stunning choker with sparkling rubies. The beauty of the piece stunned Hermione. It must be very expensive.

"Daddy," She whispered in a choked-up voice. "It's so beautiful."

"No, sweetheart, it pales in comparison to you. Let me help you put that on so that we can head down to your mum and Harry." Dan smiled tenderly as he unclasped the choker and slipped around his daughter's neck. It matched her gown brilliantly, adding a bit of colour

to the pale peach gown. Hermione stood up elegantly and was about to leave her room, when her father stopped her.

"I would love to have such a gorgeous young woman accompany me down to dinner today." Dan beamed charmingly as he offered his arm to his daughter. Hermione had blushed from her father's compliment as she draped her arm around her father's and they walked out of the room and down the stairs.

Hermione was genuinely surprised when her father had decided to lead her to the door to their garden instead of the main door to the street. Before she could ask, the sight of the garden left her stunned.

Right under the trees was a simple yet elegant arch on a platform. Professor Dumbledore was standing on the platform together with a striking raven-haired guy in a simple black tuxedo. He was smiling brightly when he had caught sight of her.

"Congratulations, sweetheart." Dan had smiled as he gauged his daughter's reaction. Her chocolate eyes were widened in astonishment and she was rendered speechless.

Her mother stood on one side of the white-carpeted aisle watching her with a soft teary smile and Professor McGonagall, her favourite professor, stood on the other, smiling warmly at her.

Emotions of joy were overwhelming her and she had got under control lest she ruin her make-up.

Dan had led her down slowly down the white carpet, towards the arch.

Hermione, you look so breathtaking, my love.

All she could see at the moment was her husband whom she was walking towards. He looked amazing. His usually messy hair was more tamed than usual and his tuxedo suited him perfectly. Hermione was close enough to notice the awed expression on her husband's face. She blushed in contentment that Harry liked how she looked.

You aren't too bad yourself, dear.

She watched the smile on his face widened with delight. She was now standing beside Harry on the platform. Dan had taken her hand and placed it into Harry's hand in the customary way of giving the daughter away at marriage.

"Take care of my daughter, Harry." Dan requested solemnly before he retreated down the platform to where Jean was sitting.

Harry nodded curtly. He shot a glance at her before they then turned to face Dumbledore. His eyes were twinkling in delight as he watched the new couple.

"We have come today to witness a wonderful union between Harry James Potter and Hermione Jane Granger. Do you, Harry James Potter take Hermione Jane Granger as your lawfully wedded wife and swear upon your magic to honour her, respect her, cherish her, and love her with all your heart for as long as you both shall live?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry was staring at Hermione with his intense green eyes. "I do."

"Do you, Hermione Jane Granger take Harry James Potter as your lawfully wedded husband and swear upon your magic to honour him, respect him, cherish him, and love him with all your heart for as long as you both shall live?" Dumbledore asked regally.

"I do." Hermione answered as her chocolate eyes shone with love.

"You may now exchange your vows and rings." Harry took the smaller golden ring nestled in the wooden box from the white table near them. "Hermione, I can't promise that I won't ever hurt you or disappoint you in the future but know that I will always love you." He smiled, knowing that this should not be the way vows are exchanged but he wanted to be honest with her. "I give you this ring as a visible and constant reminder of my love and my promise that I will be there for you forever and day." Harry said solemnly, his voice ringing with sincerity as he slid the ring into her ring finger.

With tears in her eyes, she took the other golden band.

“Harry, I give you this ring as a symbol of my love, my faith in our strength together, and my promise of devotion to you. As it encircles your finger, may it remind you always that you are surrounded by my enduring love.” Hermione said sincerely as she slid the ring into his ring finger. Harry knew that she meant every single word and tears had started to well in his eyes.

Jean was leaning on Dan as tears began to flow down her cheeks. They were young but so in love.

“I hereby pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.” Dumbledore smiled.

Harry gingerly leaned forward and kissed his wife for a brief moment as the garden erupted in applause.

When Harry had led Hermione carefully down the platform, the Grangers hugged them before heading into the house, leaving them with the guests.

Harry gently wrapped his arms around his Hermione and approached the Professors. “Thanks for coming, Professors.” He nodded formally at his two professors.

“Congratulations. Thank you for inviting us to witness your special day.” Minerva McGonagall returned warmly. “You must make sure that you both are in close physical contact lest your magical cores weaken.” She smiled as she looked at the couple. “Albus, they are indeed soul mates.” She said to the elder Professor.

“Why yes, I was certain that no magic would be released today since they already bonded yesterday. Usually a wedding ceremony evokes a creation of a marriage bond between the husband and wife. Since both of you share a soul bond, which is deeper than that, it would be more like a non-magical ritual.” Dumbledore explained to the teenagers.

“Now that both of you are legal adults, please refrain from performing magic in front of Muggles.” He added as his blue eyes twinkled. “We

couldn't think of a more appropriate present to give the two of you to wish you eternal marital bliss but this."

He presented them with a pensive.

"If you have any memories that you wish to make into a photograph, simply follow the instructions written in the note and do so." Dumbledore smiled as he handed them to the note.

"We hope that you will make many happy memories together." McGonagall said as she smiled. "We'll discuss the changes your marriage will bring once you are back in Hogwarts. Please feel free to check with us anytime if you are unsure about what your bond will mean." McGonagall went on as she looked at Dumbledore.

"Thank you." Harry and Hermione said in unison.

"I have connected the Granger fireplace to the floo network at Hogwarts. You should be able to call us should you need anything." Dumbledore added. "We regret that we can't stay any longer because we do have to get back to our duties at Hogwarts. We will see you soon, I'm sure." Dumbledore added. They went to say their good-byes to the Grangers in the house.

Now they were finally alone.

"Harry, I can't believe that you planned an entire wedding and even invited our professors. Thank you for doing all this for me." Hermione said as she turned in his embrace to look at him. Harry could feel that she was touched.

"It was my pleasure. I was able to pull it off with your parents and Dobby's help." He smiled charmingly as he kissed her forehead gently.

"I'll let you get away with keeping secrets from me this time. There will be no next time." Hermione smiled warmly as she laid her head on his chest.

"The next time, I doubt I'll be able to do it alone. We'll be throwing a big wedding for all our friends and family. For the time being, I want to keep our marriage a secret. I have already asked the Headmaster and Professor McGonagall to do just that." Harry answered as he wrapped his arms around her waist and placed his head on her shoulder.

"Why, Harry?" Hermione arched her eyebrows in surprise.

"It's not that I am not proud to be married to you, love. You know that I am. But can you imagine the repercussions if people knew that we are already married? We're still so young. I think we should wait until we are slightly older to announce it to the rest of the world. I don't want to see you hurt by any ignorant comments. Besides, we could return as a dating couple and you can let me court you." Harry grinned as he looked adoringly at his wife.

Hermione laughed brightly. "You just don't want me to regret this whole marriage thing, don't you?" Hermione answered as she turned into his embrace.

"Don't you like the idea of me courting you, Mrs. Potter?" Harry asked as he held her close.

"No comment." Hermione teased. "Anyway, I think we have to go into the house before Daddy and Mummy comes looking for us. Can I go upstairs to change?" Hermione asked as she looked at her husband pleadingly.

"Actually, we really do have a dinner to go, love." Harry chuckled as he held her hand and led her to the house. "Mum wasn't lying when she told you we had to dress up for dinner. In fact, we did not lie to you at all to get you off our track." Harry added thoughtfully.

"What about the Head of the family business?" Hermione asked as she raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"Marriage is important business for the Head of the family." Harry added as he smirked.

“Really Slytherinish, Harry.”

“I was surprised that the brightest witch of my generation didn’t get it. I guess we did an excellent job.” Harry smirked.

“Don’t push it, Harry James Potter.” Hermione jokingly threatened as she wrapped her took his arm intimately and they walked into the house.

Dan and Jean were smiling as they watched the newly married couple enter. They were obviously overjoyed. The fact that Harry would go this far to make Hermione happy impressed them. “Our ride is here. We should head out or we’ll be late.” Dan smiled as he took his wife’s hand. Jean looked wonderful in formal garb as well.

Harry was smiling as he and his father-in-law watched his wife talking animatedly to his mother-in-law. He was sure that if his wife were slightly older, she would catch the eyes of every male occupant in the posh restaurant they were in. They just finished with the main course and were talking about desserts. The food was excellent and so was the company. It had been an eventful day and he was glad that the day was ending in such a peaceful and pleasant way.

Dan Granger had been bothered by a question ever since he learned that his daughter had married and he took the moment to ask.

“Harry, are you two planning to consummate your marriage?” Dan asked suddenly in a low tone so that only Harry could catch. Harry had immediately blushed at the question. He did not expect Dan to ask about it so bluntly. It was a private matter between him and his wife, but looking at the concerned expression on Dan’s face, he knew he had to answer. If he was a father, he would be this protective of his daughter too.

“No, of course not, Dad, it’s way too soon. I was planning on waiting for at least a year.” He answered as he scratched the back of his neck and his face turned into a tomato red. Harry could understand why Dan asked, but it didn’t stop him from feeling uncomfortable.

“But you will be physically sleeping with Hermione?” Dan asked flatly.

"I need to." Harry answered as he tugged on his starched collar furiously due to the increasing embarrassment. "It is encouraged to have as much physical contact as possible until our bond stabilises." He explained sheepishly as he lowered his head.

"What were you asking Harry, Dad?" Hermione asked as she glared at her father. She could feel Harry's feelings of discomfort and mortification and it distracted her from her conversation.

"I was asking if he planned to consummate your marriage." He answered truthfully.

"Daddy!"

"Dan Granger!"

"I needed to know." Dan added defensively. "They may be married but they are still very young."

"Hermione and I haven't even discussed it. But promise you that we are not making love with each other until much later, at least until we are both ready for it." Harry answered the adults firmly and concluded the embarrassing subject.

The band had suddenly struck a simple waltz tune and many occupants had left their tables to go the dance floor. Dan caught Jean's eye and both parents left their seat to dance as well, leaving Harry and Hermione to be alone at the table.

Harry could tell that his wife wanted to join in the dancing since she was so engrossed in watching the couples twirling gracefully at the dance floor and was tapping her fingers subconsciously to the music. He didn't know how to dance and would probably be an embarrassment, but he wanted his wife to be happy too.

Sighing, Harry stood up and extended his hand to his wife. "Hermione, may I have this dance?" Harry smiled nervously.

The dazzling smile on Hermione's face was worth all the courage he had mustered as she placed her hand on his and allowed him to lead her to the centre of the floor.

"I must admit that I can't dance, love." Harry added sheepishly as he scratched his head nervously. The Dursleys never allowed him any dance lessons.

"It'll be alright. You'll learn." Hermione assured sweetly. She guided one of his hands to her waist as she placed her hand on his shoulder. "Hold my hand in this manner." She smiled as she placed her hand on his. He had gulped visibly as she led in a simple 3-step waltz.

Harry was very nervous initially and kept staring at his feet so that he would not make a mistake and step on her toes.

"Relax, You're doing rather well." Hermione encouraged as she continued to guide Harry in the dance. Harry took a deep breath and looked up at her. Seeing the joy radiating from his partner as she smiled dazzlingly at him, Harry felt more relaxed and soon got the hang of it. The young couple was dancing gracefully and was completely in sync with each other as they moved around the dance floor. Harry started to understand his wife's love for dancing.

I don't usually get a hang of physical stuff this fast.

It's just the confidence issue. You are doing very well.

When the music had changed into a soft jazz tune, Harry drew his wife closer to him by wrapping his arms around her waist and she had mirrored his action. Chocolate eyes were staring tenderly at the emerald orbs and they needed no words. The young couple swayed to the beat of the song as they quietly enjoyed this intimate moment together. Hermione laid her head gently on his chest as they continued to sway.

Harry, thank you for making this so special for me. I love you.

The pleasure is all mine, love. I love you too.

The newlyweds decided to retire to their room early. By default, they had chosen Hermione's bedroom since it was the larger of the two rooms and Hermione already had all her things in there. Harry was given the domestic task of removing the pins from her hair carefully. Hermione was reading the tome on soul bond as he proceeded with the task gently, making sure that he did not hurt his wife.

"Harry, it will take about a year to stabilise our bond. In the meantime, we might have a lot of incidents of accidental magic while our magical cores are connected and dormant powers are awakened." Hermione said. Harry knew the underlying meaning behind that statement. Do not be quick to anger lest there be unforeseen consequences.

He chuckled as he continued with his task. "You just had a bout of accidental magic in the mall yesterday."

"Harry, how else would you have expected me to react? The love of my life abused for so many years." Hermione added crossly as she glared at him through the mirror.

"I know, dear." He smiled as he placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I'm glad that I finally found someone like you." Harry added tenderly.

Hermione had looked at him adoringly.

"Together we are more powerful. Any contact could have devastating effects."

"Hermione, I know what some of our dormant powers are." He smiled as he recalled the letter, knowing that Hermione would be able to share the knowledge.

She gasped. "You can't be serious? We can really use elemental magic? The Creator sent us wedding gifts? Our rings were made by Him?"

Harry chuckled. "Oh yes. They are like wands. Can you imagine? We won't need to worry about being disarmed anymore because the disarming spell works only for wands. We would be able to speak in

all languages. Isn't that amazing? He also offered us a way to train ourselves."

"It's wonderful but I'm worried that He was hinting about a good friend or an ally that might betray you and that your true friends are the most unlikely people. The only good friends you have other than me is Ron and the Weasley family. Do you think He was referring to them?"

"I have no idea. I guess I'll be fine if I can confide in my wife." He smiled as he placed all the pins on the dressing table. "I am finally done. Let me go over and get the items from the Creator."

He hurried back to the guest room, took the letter and the glass bottle, and returned to Hermione's room. He gave the letter to Hermione who began to read it while Harry took a look at the House. It looked rather new and simple, so no one would think it was a magical item from its physical appearance. This was probably the reason why the Creator had made it in such a way.

"O.W.L.s this year? Would the Headmaster agree?" Hermione said as she glanced at her husband.

"I guess this is why we need to be trained before we go back to school. To show that we are capable of it." Harry added as he looked at his ring. I wonder if it really works?

"Wingardium Leviosa" He called out as he pointed to the journal with his left hand. To his surprise, it really levitated, proving that the ring works.

"Dear, would you want to test the House now?" Hermione asked as her eyes gleamed brightly. Hermione proceed to place the bottle on her dressing table.

"We have the rings, so what do we do?" Harry asked as he looked curiously at the house. There was no indication to as to how they were supposed to get into the house.

Hermione was frowning in thought.

Harry suddenly recalled the letter. Hermione, we have to wish to get into the house. I wish to enter the house.

Suddenly a brightly glowing rune appeared on the spot he was standing and Harry disappeared.

A/N: Thank you frustr8dwriter for doing such a brilliant job in editing. Thank you for all the reviews. Have a nice week.

Chapter 4

beta-read by frustr8dwriter

Harry found himself on the hard, cool marble floor after he made his wish. His round-rimmed spectacles were skewed from the impact of the fall. He winced in pain as he moved. Harry pushed his glasses up his nose and took a good look at his new surroundings.

The sight made him gasp in awe. Solid white Greek Columns that seemed to sparkle with the rays of the setting sun surrounded the wide, flat ground he was lying on. It was only when he saw the grand mansion that stood regally on a little hill in the distance that he realised that he was only in a small section of the place. The evening sun did not diminish the majesty of that magnificent marble house but bathed it in an array of warm colours. Harry knew it was cliché to use this term, but the scene was absolutely enchanting. He was bowled down by the splendour of this fantasy world.

He spotted a short path on the side of the arrival area that lead to the building. It was beautifully decorated with white Grecian arches.

There was a large green forest to the side of the marble mansion. Sounds of running water could be heard, suggesting that there was a waterfall or a gushing river nearby. It seemed like a wonderful place to relax. Harry found himself quickly falling in love with the place.

Suddenly, a glowing white rune appeared next to him and Hermione began to materialise. He was glad to see that she had more poise than he did - she landed gracefully on her two feet as the rune faded. Her chocolate orbs were filled with wonder as she took in the picturesque scene.

"Wow is the right word," joked Harry as he stood up and brushed the imaginary dust off of him. They were relieved to find their wands when they checked their pockets.

"Welcome to the House, Lord and Lady Potter," rang a feminine voice loudly. "I am Adedes, or Ade for short."

There were befuddled expressions on their faces when they heard the voice. Harry decided to gather his courage and speak up.

“Ah well, it’s nice to meet you, I guess. Please call me Harry instead. I hope you don’t mind my asking, but who are you?” Harry said as he turned around and tried to detect the source of the voice. He felt very uncomfortable talking to air.

“Alright, Harry. I am the House. The Sator had told me to expect you. Would you like me to give you the grand tour?”

“Ade, please call me Hermione. Would you mind telling us how slow time is in here compared to the time outside?” Hermione asked in concern. She was afraid that her parents would get worried if they realised that they have disappeared. They had to be back in their own room in the morning lest they found out.

“The current House time is one month to one real hour. I can also adjust the time if need be.” answered Ade simply. “I think I should show you the grounds first since I can sense that you both are curious about where you are. Please wait a moment while I physically manifest into something.”

Physically manifest? They thought in surprise. Before they could ask any questions, an elegant young lady wearing a toga appeared. She looked so ethereal in her perfection that Harry felt blood rushing to his face. He could not take his eyes off the way she walked as she approached them with a grace that was unnaturally captivating.

“Are you Ade?” Hermione asked curiously. The lady in toga nodded and gave them a holster each for their wands. Harry immediately strapped his holster on his arm and placed his wand in it. Hermione, who was satisfied that there was no danger, followed suit.

“Very good. The holsters will become invisible once they are strapped on. It also has a built-in anti-summoning charm. Furthermore, it will allow you to retract or release your wand at will.” Ade explained. True enough, their holsters did indeed disappear. “Let me show you to the main hall.” Ade continued with a warm smile as she led them through the large antique doors into a larger and more imposing living area.

The hall was huge and airy. Hermione estimated the ceiling to be at least 3 stories high. The walls were made of dark mahogany. The two imposing floor-to-ceiling windows standing on each side of a very large portrait lighted up the place. Across the room from the windows were two imposing staircases that led up to the upper floors. A grand chandelier was hanging from the high ceiling right in the middle of the room.

The most fascinating thing of the room was the ceiling. Painted with beautiful life-like angels and clouds that moved occasionally, it was a serene and joyful scene depicting heaven. The ceiling glowed in a shade of pale gold due to the light coming off of the chandelier.

The portrait of a handsome distinguished man garbed in a mage suit beamed warmly at them as he spotted the new arrivals.

“Good day, Harry and Hermione Potter,” welcomed the man in the portrait cordially as he doffed his hat in polite greeting.

“Are you The Creator?” They asked in astonishment as their eyes widened. Never in their wildest imagination did they think they would be speaking to the portrait of the Creator. His blue eyes were twinkling with joy as he looked down at them.

“Well, don’t look so surprised that my house would have a portrait of me!” The man responded joyfully. “Please call me Edmund. Don’t you just love the ceiling? I do. Now, in my time, the non-magical beings actively persecuted us on the basis that we were ‘spawned of the devil’. They even went as far as to claim that wizards would never go to heaven. Don’t you think it is ironic that I have heaven painted on my ceiling?” He grinned rakishly before turning his attention back to them. A frown immediately marred his beautiful face.

“Harry, you look awfully thin for your age. Please ask Althea for the potions to make help him grow to a normal size, Ade,” instructed Edmund as he glanced at Ade. She nodded and he turned back to face them with a warm friendly smile on his lips. “I didn’t expect the two of you to come and visit so soon. In fact, I wasn’t expecting you

until after Harry's birthday. Were you just curious?" Edmund chuckled warmly as his blue eyes twinkled like Christmas lights.

"Yes. The rings worked, so we wanted to see if we could get into the House," answered Harry as he stared at the portrait in awe.

He stroked his smooth chin, "Oh yes, the rings. I had a bit of fun creating those. It conceals itself naturally unless you choose to show it. Your rings will be able to warn you if the person you are talking have any intentions of hurting you. The real fun begins when you learn to apparate. There are no barriers that will be able to restrain you because the rings are designed to break them. I believe that I may have added a few more charms. You just have to try it find those surprises on your own." He smiled excitedly. "By the way, you can never remove the rings once you've put them on. I designed it this way so that no one else will be able to use these rings. I wanted to avoid them to falling into the wrong hands."

"Thank you." Harry answered, his voice choked with emotions. It was beyond his comprehension why a person he had never met before would give him such a priceless gift.

With a sincere tone, Edmund answered. "You are very special, Harry. Fate has chosen you to carry out a difficult task. I felt it was unfair for someone as young as you to be saddled with such a heavy burden. It is my greatest wish that whatever help I can give you will help you in freeing the oppressed from their oppressors."

Ade arrived with the potions that Edmund had requested. She handed a vial over to Harry who took it and drank it. It felt a bit weird but he felt better after a while.

"I won't keep you from your tour of the house. You are welcome to come and talk to me anytime you wish. I love company." He concluded warmly as Ade took them up the steps to the dining area.

The dining area was much too vast and formal for their liking. Ade also showed them the kitchen. They were surprised to find a modern non-magical kitchen with modern appliances. It was decorated practically – with clean white walls and black tiles.

“Food magically appears in here during meal times when there are people living here. We do not actually require a kitchen. We have set this one up in case either one of you wants to cook a meal yourself or to practice your household charms in.,” explained Ade.

Next, she took them to a large open bathing area. A swimming pool-like marble bath with many gold taps on the side sat in the middle of the place. It was facing the forest and they could see a river and a large waterfall. The place was very comfortable but too unrestricted for their liking. “This is the bathing area. I know that you are used to something more secure, but you two are the only people in the house who will require a bath. You don’t have to be worried about being disturbed. You will have complete privacy while you are in here.” She added as waited for the awe-stricken teenagers to walk to her side.

“It is like an open-air version of a Roman public bath.” Hermione declared as she looked at the room.

“That is where Sator got his inspiration but he liked it to be more spacious and airy. Although it feels like you’re outdoors, the temperature will always remain comfortable in here.” Ade answered as she smiled. “Both of you could come and bathe in here later.” To her surprise, the young couple blushed. “Aren’t you married?” She blinked in confusion and frowned.

“We are, as of yesterday.” Hermione answered.

“Then, there shouldn’t be any problems.” Ade summarised as she walked on, obviously still perplexed by their reactions. She proceeded to show them to the training room, the potion room, the sparring room, the flying area, the various workshops, their bedroom, and the library. It was the last room that excited them the most.

The library was huge, almost three stories high with a round glass dome as it’s ceiling. Rows after rows of bookcases filled with books filled the room. They were all catalogued precisely, first by their genre, next by their titles. Hermione felt as if she was in a fantasy world as she spun around the library, taking in the sight of the marvellous room.

I'm in heaven. She thought it was the perfect place to read. She could imagine herself curling up in one of the armchairs placed near the large fireplace, reading.

"The Creator loves books. He made it a point to collect every book ever written. The library is updated regularly," said Ade proudly.

"He can't read these books anymore, can he?" Hermione asked curiously as she glanced at the selection briefly. Some tomes were so old that she had never heard of them yet they were all in mint condition. Harry chuckled as he saw that familiar twinkle in her eyes. It was similar to the gleam in a child's eyes when a child is in a sweet shop.

"I always read to him." Ade explained. "He can get awfully bored since no one has occupied this place for a very long time." Ade went on she smiled warmly. "This is why everyone is looking forward to seeing both of you. Your teachers are ready to get your training started, but Sator has instructed Tollak, your instructor for weapon mastery and physical training, to allow you some rest before he meets with you. Apparently, Tollak wants you to beef both of you up for his practices. I think Elissa will want to know how sharp your writing skills are. By the way, she will also be teaching you History of magic." Ade said.

"Are the teachers who will be training us physical manifestations of the branches of magic?" Hermione asked as her chocolate eyes widened.

Ade looked as if it was the most natural thing in this world. "Yes, of course. How do you think they last in here? Who else would have the knowledge to teach all you want to learn but the branches of magic themselves?"

"I didn't think that weapon mastery was a magical art," admitted Harry. He had that perception since it was not taught in Hogwarts.

"I think that the reason that people forget that it is a magical art is probably because it is now rare for wizards and witches to use

weapons these days. You fight using only magic right? In the past, mages used both magic and weapons. Often, their only weapons are their wands.” Ade added.

“Well, that’s something different to consider.” Hermione said as she frowned in thought and bit her bottom lips thoughtfully. Harry thought she looked completely adorable. “Ade, we usually sleep for about six hours. Does this mean we will be staying here for 6 months?” Hermione asked thoughtfully.

“Yes, that is correct. You need to be here not only for training, but to stabilise your bond as well. You will not need your wands during this stay. It will take about a year for your magical cores to merge completely and become stable.” Ade concluded.

Ade looked meaningfully at the sky. It was getting dark. The whole glass dome roof lit up, illuminating the library, as the sky grew dark. The logs in the fireplace came alive suddenly. “I think it is time for both of you to go to sleep. You can continue your exploration tomorrow.” She beamed as gave each of them a magically enchanted map. The map would inform them where they needed to go and help them find their way through the House. “You should ask your instructors to teach you how to apparate soon. It is easier to travel that way. Goodnight, young ones.” Ade said. With that she disappeared.

“Thank Merlin that it’s a very short walk to our room.” Harry muttered as he pointed to the red dot on the map that indicated their bedroom with his finger. He was suddenly feeling so worn out that he could fall asleep standing up. There were two green dots on the map in the area indicated as library. These had their names “Harry Potter” and “Hermione Potter”.

Hermione checked her map. “We’ll have to take a right turn. Let’s go. I’m really quite tired,” urged Hermione as they walked hand in hand back to their room.

The large bed in the centre of the room was big and comfortable. It was then did the reality of their marriage hit him. They were married

and they needed to share a bed. Harry drew his hand through his messy hair nervously as he stared at the bed.

What was Hermione going to wear? She was wearing a casual attire of jeans and shirt. It must have been very uncomfortable to sleep in and did not have her nightgown to change to. Would she sleep with only her underwear? The idea of it sent his hormones on overdrive, as he grew flustered.

Hermione was worried about that particular issue as well. She had never shared a room with Harry and she didn't know if he had the habit of wearing clothes to bed. The thought of Harry and her sharing a bed made blood rush up to her face.

Harry, vaguely recalling seeing a wardrobe when they toured their bedroom earlier, found the large mahogany wardrobe that was built into one wall. He was just too pre-occupied with the bed to really notice it moments ago. He walked across the large and stylishly decorated room to check the contents of the closet.

Harry's jaw dropped at the sight. There were a wide variety of clothes inside. Hermione's clothes were distinctly separated from his clothes. They were categorised, first, Muggle or magical clothing, then by the occasions to wear them, and finally by colour. Harry gave a sigh of relief when he spotted various sleep clothes that Hermione could wear for the night. He was glad that they had taken their age into consideration.

"Hermione, there are several nightgowns you can choose to sleep in," said Harry. Harry usually only slept in his boxers because he hated being too warm, but he selected a sleeveless shirt and a pair of shorts. He could see the relief in his wife's face when she noted the outfit he was wearing to bed as she took a nightgown from the wardrobe. She then walked to the adjoining bathroom to change.

Harry had changed into his nightclothes and placed his dirty laundry in the basket found on one side of the bathroom. He took out his holster, his wand and his glasses and placed them on the bedside table before climbing onto the bed. Taking deep breaths in an attempt to calm down as he waited for Hermione, Harry lay flat on his back.

He felt as if there were butterflies in his stomach. The need to sleep was completely eradicated by his nervousness. He did not need to be a seer to know it was going to be a long night for them.

Hermione walked over to the vacant side of the bed and climbed into it. She glanced apprehensively at Harry and noted that his scar was even more prominent than usual because he kept messing up his hair worriedly. Hermione was mildly pleased that she was not the only one who was feeling the nerves. "Harry, I'm going to turn off the lights now." Hermione announced. She was glad that her voice was not trembling when she was also having butterflies in her stomach. Harry nodded curtly and she turned the lights off magically.

"Goodnight, Harry." Hermione muttered softly as she lay on her side so that her back was facing him.

"Goodnight, Hermione." He answered as he turned to side, with his back against her and a distance between them. It was worse than the last night. The need to touch each other was overwhelming. It took all their effort and willpower not to reach out and make that physical contact with each other. It was made worse since they were only inches apart.

Harry did not know if she would be comfortable with more contact since they had transitioned from best friends to dating to husband and wife within a short span of two days. Knowing Harry's doubts, Hermione realised she needed to make the first move. So she did. She turned over to her side so that she was facing Harry and placed one of her arm on his waist and snuggled up to him. Harry stiffened for a moment but soon relaxed.

She could smell Harry's musky scent. It was fast becoming her favourite scent. Contented that she was near him, she felt herself drawn deeper into slumber. Harry followed suit soon after.

Harry was first to wake up that morning. In his morning daze, he was shock to find something brown and bushy obscuring his sight. He panicked. After a while, he calm down when he realised it was Hermione- he detected her sweet familiar vanilla scent.

Harry chuckled softly when he discovered that they had changed positions in the night. His arms were now around her waist and she was pressing hard on him. Harry groaned lightly, he could feel blood travelling lower as she turned in his arms. Sweet Merlin!

Harry tried to remove his arm from her so that he could get out of the bed. But alas, Hermione's legs and his legs were entangled intimately together. There was no way he could get off the bed without waking her up.

The sudden movement had wakened Hermione and she began to stir. Hermione opened her eyes sleepily to look at him. As she started to focus, changing from her adorable sleepy look to a slightly more alert one. Harry, fascinated by the display, watched on, forgetting about the reason he had to get away from the bed. It was a precious sight, one that he wanted to see each time he opened his eyes, every morning for the rest of his life.

"Good morning, dear. Did you sleep well?" Harry beamed brightly. He tenderly tucked some of her brown hair behind her ear. Hermione glanced back at him lovingly before she rolled away from him and onto her side. She was now looking at him directly.

"It was one of my best nights." Hermione smiled as she affectionately stroked the sides of his face. The sight of his even messier than usual hair and slightly sleepy emerald eyes tugged at her heartstrings. "You look totally gorgeous this way. I would love to kiss you but I haven't brushed my teeth." Hermione laughed brightly as happiness bubbled in her. The sight of seeing Harry with his morning look in the bed next to her felt so surreal. She was indeed married to him.

Harry arched his eyebrows in disbelief as a tender smile tugged his lips. His eyes softened with adoration as they met her gaze.

You are so beautiful.

Her heart soared at the declaration.

His heart was fluttering as Harry leaned closer to her. He tilted his head slightly as his lips parted. He gently brushed his lips along her

lips. She purred softly in contentment. Smiling, he pulled back slightly and brushed his nose with his. There was a smile of amusement on her face as Hermione closed her eyes and firmly wrapped her arms around his neck. She teasingly brushed her lips across his lips lightly before their lips met with a bit more pressure.

Without a warning, Harry suddenly pulled back, wrenched the arms from his neck, jumped off the bed and dashed into the bathroom, leaving a befuddled Hermione on the bed.

What happened, love? Her thought was laced with concern.

Ah...Morning need. I needed a cold shower. Hermione could hear the sounds of the shower running.

Hermione felt his embarrassment. She knew that male hormones could get wild at his age since he was still developing. She stood up and went to take out the clothes she wanted to change into after she had showered. She laid them in a neat pile on the dresser. Hermione then took out a set of clothes for him and laid them on the bed.

Your clothes are on the bed, love.

Thank you, Hermione.

After five minutes, the door of the bathroom opened. Harry was only clad in a towel. Hermione lowered her head as she took her things and hurriedly entered the bathroom to have her shower.

Harry quickly dressed up in the attire she had selected with great admiration for Hermione. She had remembered that they were going to do something physical today and she had chosen clothes that were suitable.

Thank you, Hermione. Harry smiled. I probably will go grab a book from the library as I wait for you. Anything you want to read?

How about the guide on soul bond? I haven't finish reading it. I hope Edmund has a spare copy.

Sure, Hermione.

Harry managed to find a spare copy of the 'Guide to Soul Bonds' in the library and brought it back to their bedroom to read.

It was then that Hermione realise that they could share the knowledge they have read from the books through their mind-link. It was a useful thing to discover since they could finish more readings that way. She was reading what Harry was reading through the link. He was on the section where they could shift to each other.

That is a useful skill. You can go to where I am and I can go to you easily.

She could feel his inquisitiveness. She did not want him to appear next to her while she was bathing. Please don't try it now.

I had no intention of doing so, Hermione. Harry thought in embarrassment.

When Hermione was finally dressed, they headed to the training room since there was a red dot on it, signalling it was the place in the house they needed to be. Ade had informed them yesterday that Tollak had wanted to do start with some basic exercises with them ready for his practice sessions.

“Good morning, Harry and Hermione. I am Tollak or Toll for short. I will be your instructor for Weapon Mastery.” He smiled warmly. He was tall and lean and pleasant to look at. “Both of you will need to run twice a day. Once in the morning, before you have your breakfast and another before your dinner. Warm up before every run, it will save you from a lot of pain. I’ll be guiding you through your warm-ups later,” said Toll as he looked at his students. He was glad to see that they were not protesting. “You start your run at six. I heard that you both have the habit of waking up early. That’s good, because you will need to wake up early every day. It will make my life easier. You will be meeting Elissa later for some testing, and she will let me know if she needs to spend more time with you. If she does not, you’ll have three hours of break after every meal. Three hours after breakfast, you will both have to return here for muscle training. Your next lesson,

hand-to-hand combat, will take place three hours after lunch. Both sessions will last for about 2 hours each. All these times will be updated on schedule parchment in your bedroom accordingly.”

“I will provide you some pepper-up potion should you really require it. My aim is to get you in a better physical shape. Harry, you look as if a slight gust of wind could blow you away. Hermione, it would be better if you have some physical endurance and agility. So let’s get cracking!” Toll smiled as he rubbed his hands.

He demonstrated a set of warm ups to stretch all their muscles. After ensuring that they had drunk two glasses of water, Toll took them to the place where they were supposed to run. Toll had selected a beautiful outdoor course, with a running track that ran parallel to the river outside.

The area they were running in was breathtaking. Having each other as partners helped them to stay focused on the task. Harry had more stamina to run in comparison to Hermione but with encouragement, they had managed to cover a distance.

When they finished running, Toll guided them through some cool-downs before sending them off for their breakfast.

Harry and Hermione thoroughly enjoyed their first meal of the day. They had an Irish breakfast that morning – complete with rashers of bacon, bangers, fried tomatoes and potatoes, eggs, and black and white puddings. Harry had to drink another of that potion to ensure that he grew into his ideal size. Afterwards, they trooped upstairs for a shower and had a change of clothes before they met Elissa.

Elissa reminded them of Professor McGonagall, a strict and no-nonsense type of teacher. She had auburn hair that was tied neatly into a bun and she held herself stiffly. The only difference between Professor McGonagall and Elissa was that she greeted them with a smile when they entered the room. The classroom was a fairly large with two large desks and a blackboard.

“Good morning Harry and Hermione. I am Elissa. I will be teaching you a great variety of things. For today, I just need you to write about

something that interests you so that I can assess your writing skills and your penmanship. I aim to correct illegible scrawls and coach you to attaining excellent writing skills. If we find we have more time today, we will begin covering third year History of Magic.”

Harry frowned when he realised that he was going to end up having more lessons than Hermione.

“May I ask what you are a physical manifestation of?” Hermione questioned as she frowned in thought.

“Simply, non-magical associated knowledge. To give you an example, I know who created a spell, when the spell was created, how the spell works in theory, but I cannot actually cast the spell. I can coach you on how to present yourself in a society and how you can communicate more effectively with people. I am able to teach you about everything that has taken place in History, both in the Magical and Non-magical worlds.” Elissa answered. “Let’s get to work or Toll will be missing both of you for your second session.”

Hermione did not have to attend any of her lessons to improve her handwriting since hers was already beautiful and neat - but Harry had to. Both of their essay skills needed a little fine-tuning and after that was achieved, Hermione was allowed to leave while Harry had to continue to practice writing.

Harry did not see a point in learning to write properly but Elissa insisted it was of great importance and he obliged. Harry would be having an hour of writing lessons every day until his penmanship improved. In the meantime, Hermione would need to attend two hours of History lessons with Harry while Harry had to do an additional hour beyond that with Elissa.

They used up their entire three-hour break with Elissa. The next lesson was muscle training with Toll. He made them do routines to tone and strengthen their muscles. He also gave them exercises to increase agility and flexibility since they were young and could still be easily trained. Toll had given them simple exercises to them first. Later, he gave Harry more focused muscle training he had already developed some agility from his Quidditch practices back at school.

After their muscle training was completed, they had lunch. It was equally scrumptious. Harry knew that he was going to put on a bit of weight while staying in the House. "I wish Ron were here to try this. I can definitely imagine him gobbling down the food." Harry smiled as he took another bite, and then he frowned as the guilt from not thinking about his friend swept through him. "I wonder how he's doing in Egypt."

"I'm sure he's enjoying himself since he's in Egypt. It's a great place to have a holiday." Hermione answered as she held his hand comfortingly. "Do you think we should tell him about our marriage or just let him think that we are dating?" Hermione asked. She knew that they were going to have to conceal their marriage from the rest of the Wizard World for the time being.

"I guess we'll have to wait until we see him to gauge how much we should tell him." Harry answered sheepishly as a small voice in his head reminded him of Edmund's advice.

They had Occlumency lessons after lunch. Edmund felt that it was an important skill to learn so that they could ensure that no one could fish out important information from their heads. Having the skills will also help them recall things perfectly. In Harry and Hermione's case, they would also be able to block out each other if necessary.

"I'm sure that Harry would want to prevent you from experiencing his pain if he is physically hurt. It serves no purpose if both of you are incapacitated by his pain when in reality, only one needs healing. However, you must both master this art in order to achieve that since your minds are intimately linked." Their Mind Arts instructor told them. He told them to meditate everyday to create their mind shields.

Toll was glad that they were starting meditation in their Occlumency lessons since self-defence also required them to do so. He proceeded to teach them how to roll and break falls. He had even given them a theory lesson on pressure points of the body so that they would know which areas they could attack to cause a great deal of distress. Toll taught them how to defend themselves effectively

during a fight. This was important since they were supposed to learn a set of martial arts by the end of the eight months.

They took a break and went for their evening run. By dinnertime, their muscles were aching so badly that they needed potions to relieve the pain. Their teachers gave them the rest of the night off out of pity. So after dinner, Harry and Hermione merrily used each other as support to get to their bedroom. They had wrapped their arms around each other and leaned into each other as they staggered upstairs to their bedroom like a pair of drunks. When they finally reached their bed, Harry and Hermione collapsed on their bed happily and refused to move an inch after their long day.

"Harry, you know we haven't showered and changed from our run." Hermione added as she rolled painfully out of their bed. She did not want to leave the bed, but they had to shower. "We positively stink." She took out her nightgown and prepared to take a bath.

"I know you are also too tired to shower, so why bother? If both of us smell, then neither of us can complain about the other, right? Just let me sleep." He grinned cheekily as he covered his eyes with an arm.

"Harry James Potter, that's not hygienic! Shower first before you sleep!" Hermione hissed as she poked him and folded her arms. Harry's emerald eyes were twinkling as he sat up. He winced a little in pain because of his muscles.

"Okay, Hermione." Harry smiled humorously as he stood up and took a set of nightclothes. "I should have asked Ade to conjure up two bathrooms." He grumbled. Suddenly, an idea came to him. "Why don't you join me in the bathing area? It is large and comfortable. We could put a lot of bubbles in and not see each other." Harry said eagerly as he recalled the breathtaking bathing area. He had wanted to use the area but it was too vast for him to use alone. "I remember that there's a small changing room so I can use it while you change in the bathing area."

Hermione, thrilled with the prospect of getting to try the spectacular bathing area, agreed after stating several conditions: there must be

enough bubbles to hide them both and they were to sit at the opposite ends of the pool. Harry heartily agreed to all of them.

Harry and Hermione trooped into the bathing area. The small changing room at one end of room was assigned as Harry's side. They waited for the bubbles to form before Harry went to the changing room to undress. He stripped himself naked in the changing room and covered his waist with a towel as he waited for Hermione to shout that she was ready.

He heard the sounds of water splashing as Hermione entered into the water. He felt her relief when the heat of the water began to soothe her muscles. He knew she was soaking in the warm waters when he felt her completely relax. Harry felt the blood rushing to his face when he realised that they were going to be totally naked in a bath together.

You may come out. I promise that I'm not going to look.

Close your eyes, Hermione. I am coming out.

He briskly walked to his side of the bath, put his towel aside, and slipped into the water. There were so many bubbles and such a large distance between them that it was simply too paranoid of Harry to worry about Hermione seeing anything.

You may open your eyes, Hermione.

That was quite fast, Harry.

Didn't want you to start peeking at me. Harry thought cheekily as he relaxed into the water.

I can't steal a look at you unless I have really powerful eyes. It is just too far for me to see anything. Hermione thought she needed to remind him that it was simply impossible to do that because of the distance.

He could feel the warmth of the water reach his aching muscles. It eased his aching body tremendously. He felt he was so relaxed that

he could fall asleep. He did not know that warm water could have that effect on his body.

I added something else to the bath. There was a tap that releases foam to restore tired and aching bodies.

Harry beamed as he closed his eyes. Great! Let's bathe like this every day evening. I think it would help us a lot.

Hermione heartily agreed.

Two white glowing runes began to shine in the middle of the room. Suddenly, Harry and Hermione materialised. They landed gracefully on their feet as they looked around. The bedroom was in the exact way they had left it. The letter from Edmund, the heavy old tome and the journals of his parents were still on the desk.

Hermione checked the digital clock on the side of her bed. It read 5 a.m. Only six hours had past in the real world but they had spent half a year in the House. Harry gently pulled Hermione into his arms as he kissed her forehead. "Good morning, dear." Harry grinned broadly.

Harry had grown several inches since the potion he drank daily helped him to catch up to normal size. He had become slightly bulkier with lean muscles from all the exercises he did every day. She could feel the hardness of his chest as she leaned into his embrace. Gone was the scrawny little guy that looked as if he was only eleven when he was already thirteen. A lean, fit, and tall young man replaced him. Hermione knew that she was going to have a lot of trouble with the female population once they head back to Hogwarts.

They had finished covering the entire syllabus of History of Magic for their O.W.L.s. Harry and Hermione were now masters of Occlumency and could fight hand-to-hand very well after the intense 6 months of training they had in the House. They enjoyed their stay immensely since they had had the time to relax near the forest or in the library.

"Thank goodness Edmund had the foresight to allow us to leave there in the morning so that we won't suffer from the change of time." Harry

beamed happily. "Let's go for our morning run." Harry grinned happily as he swung both of their entwined hands playfully around.

"I can't believe that I'm so used to running twice a day now." Hermione laughed. "I think we need to go shopping soon, love. You have grown much taller and wider because of your potion and all the physical training. And we cannot shirk or enlarge our clothes because our magic is still unstable. Edmund says we can't age in the house, but it seems that we can physically change." Hermione had lost quite a lot of weight and her body was now slim and toned.

Harry wrapped his arms around her small waist as if he were measuring. "I think your shorts will be too loose for you." Harry added. "What would Daddy and Mummy said if I needed to go shopping again?" He laughed. They had actually gone shopping for clothes only two days ago in real world. "How are we going to explain this drastic change in our bodies?"

"Puberty and magic?" Hermione offered with a hopeful tone as she grinned at him. Harry merely laughed and kissed her nose as she giggled girlishly. The six months did wonders for Harry. Harry was simply glowing with happiness, confidence, and good health.

"My beautiful clever wife, is that all you can come up with?" Harry laughed heartily as his emerald eyes shone with amusement.

"It's logical isn't it?" She shrugged as a small smile tugged her lips.

"I was quite thin not too long ago. I think you can use some of the running shorts I bought..." He trailed off as he scrunched his face and tried to recall the time. Harry was pretty mixed up with house time and real time.

"Two days ago." Hermione answered. "You've got to remember, lest you blow our cover."

"We were married yesterday." Harry grinned broadly "We can't act like we've missed Mum and Dad too much later because we just saw

them last night.” Harry reminded, showing how well he knew Hermione.

Hermione frowned as she bit her lips. Harry gently pecked her lips as he went took two pairs of shorts for them. “Let’s see how different it is to run over here.” Harry beamed as he passed her a new pair of running shorts. “I think I should wear Dudley’s clothes because I think my new shirts are going to be too small.” He answered as he grabbed an old and baggy shirt for himself and Hermione’s shirt for her.

“Why don’t you change here, Harry? We can always turn our backs to each other to change.” Hermione asked as she watched him trying to leave their room to go the bathroom.

“I think I’d still prefer to change in the bathroom.” He added as Harry had lowered his head and walked out.

In the six months of House time, Hermione never had a chance to see his back. Initially, Hermione thought that it was because he was shy. Now, she was convinced that he was hiding something from her. Harry would tell her when he wanted to, she thought as she tied her brown hair up in a high ponytail and got ready to go for a run with Harry.

It was it was the day after Harry & Hermione’s wedding and the Grangers did not want to bother them since they were probably exhausted from all the excitement of the day before. The Grangers decided to eat their breakfast without them.

The glowing young couple entered into the kitchen from the front door. They were dressed in shorts and shirt and it was obvious that they had just come back from a morning run. The Grangers gasped in shock when they got a good look at them. Hermione had looked much more fit compared to the day before and she was wiping perspiration off of her face and neck.

Hermione never had the inclination to exercise and the physical change stunned them. The sight of Harry had also surprised them. He looked as if he had grown about four inches overnight and he looked very robust instead of being unhealthily thin. It was the glow

on their faces that startled the older couple in the Kitchen. They were simply radiant with vitality.

“Good morning, Mum and Dad.” They chimed in unison as they settled in their seats. Jean’s mocha eyes had widened when she looked at them.

“Did the two of you have a growth spurt or something?” Dan asked incredulously as he stared at Harry. He was helping Hermione spread jam on her toast as she went poured two glasses of water for them. Hermione placed the glasses of water before them before she returned to her seat.

“Harry has been taking potions that have helped him catch up to normal size.” Hermione answered as she contentedly took the toast from Harry after rewarding him with a sweet smile. “Thanks, love.”

“You’re welcome, dear.” Harry ate his toast. “I finally look like I’m turning thirteen.” He grinned happily since they did not seem to be suspicious about their reason.

“Yes. It’s wonderful to see you looking so good.” Jean smiled. Both Grangers did not know much about magic so they had let it pass. Was it natural for both of them to become so fit overnight?

“Do we have any plans for today?” Hermione asked after she finished her toast.

“We were thinking about bringing you to the beach. Would you like that?” Dan suggested as he looked at the young couple. Harry and Hermione had exchanged a look between them and finally agreed as long as they could stop for a quick shopping trip.

“Let’s get into the water.” Hermione suggested as she pointed to the cool waters. It was a very hot day at the beach. Harry and Hermione had been walking along the edges of the shore, enjoying the feeling of having the cool seawater rushing over their feet. They were walking back to find their parents who were hiding from the sun and enjoying the breeze by staying under the beach umbrella. Hermione was clad in her new bikini that they had bought along with other

clothes. It highlighted her toned body. Harry couldn't take his mind off her slender long legs that were shown prominently. Hermione did not comment about his fascination with them, in fact she was pleased that he was admiring her.

Hermione went into the water first and waded in until water reached her waist. "Harry, it's really nice in here." She smiled as she beckoned Harry to join. Harry looked apprehensive until he felt Hermione splashing water at him.

"Why you!" He hurriedly removed his shirt, threw it aside and waded into the cool water and started splashing back at her. Harry and Hermione were laughing brightly as they began to spray water at each other. In the end, Harry decided to tackle Hermione playfully into the water. Hermione was faster and she sidestepped his attack. He ended up crashing into the water with his face plunging into the water first.

Hermione's laughter had died down immediately.

Harry stood up and was shocked to see that his spouse had paled. She was as white as a sheet. He mentally retraced the last thing he did and he realised what she saw.

Oh bollocks! The scars. His emerald eyes had widened in realisation.

Large, white welts crisscrossed his back. They were the only physical evidence of his abuse inflicted by his relatives.

"Harry?" She whispered softly in deep grief. It was so faint that he could barely catch it.

Harry felt the increase in the speed of wind. It was not a good sign. It could be disastrous if Hermione unleashed any more accidental magic. The winds started to become stronger.

"Hermione, please calm yourself down. You might hurt someone." Harry said in a soothing manner.

The winds began to whip even more violently around them. The waves crashed even more violently into the shore in increasing frequency as the trees began to sway violently.

"Hermione, I'm sorry for hiding it from you. I couldn't let you see my scars. I just don't have it in me to look anyone in the eye once they've realised what kind of childhood I've had." Harry said hoarsely as he lowered his head.

"Harry, you have to know that that isn't why I'm upset." Hermione whispered in distress.

The winds began to die down as tears began to well in her large chocolate eyes.

She approached his back carefully as she stared at the white scars in horror. Her fingers shook as she reached out to touch them. The moment she did, he flinched. "Do they still hurt?" she whispered in anguish.

"No." Harry said as he closed his eyes in shame.

To his utter disbelief, he felt her arms encircle him from behind and the gentle touch of her lips on his back. "How brave of you to live through this..." Hermione whispered reverently as she gently kissed one of his scars.

"Hermione," Harry groaned as he wrapped his arms around his wife and drew her into his embrace. "I love you." Harry gently tipped her head up and kissed away the salty tears tenderly. Bending his head, he took her lips in a long, sweet lingering kiss. The kiss was gentle and sweet, fully expressing their love for each other. Harry could feel love bursting in his heart and pouring through his veins until he was filled by the sheer bliss of their love.

Their lips parted after a while. Harry held Hermione close to him as she laid her head on his chest and enjoyed the warmth of having her in his arms.

"I was upset because no one has the right to hurt you this way." Hermione explained herself as she circled his bare chest with her finger lovingly.

"They won't have the chance to do so anymore. I can always use magic or give them a bloody nose." Harry grinned rakishly.

Hermione snorted. "Giving them a bloody nose is not enough. I really want to hex them over and over again with the meanest spells I can find." Hermione flared a little.

"Just remember to leave something that others can identify their bodies with when you are done." Harry teased lightly as he lovingly pressed a kiss on her head.

Hermione gently swatted his chest playfully as Harry erupted into loud guffaws.

"Hermione, Harry. We should be heading home." Dan shouted to them from the shore.

"We'll be right there, Dad." He called back. "Dad and Mum look worried. Let's go." He took her hand and they walked back towards the Grangers who were waiting anxiously at the beach. The Grangers were concerned about the freak weather and thus decided to go back early. Harry thought it was prudent not to mention that the freak weather was the result of Hermione's anger and Hermione was too ashamed about her lack of control to mention anything as well.

"Harry, we could try to have the scars removed the next time we enter the House. I am sure Althea will have something that can help."

Over in the Headmaster's office, the two major decision makers of the Hogwarts were discussing the Minister's proposed plan.

"Do you think it is sensible to endanger the entire student body with Dementors by making them guardians of the school just because there's a slight possibility that Sirius Black might come to Hogwarts?" Professor McGonagall asked with deep concern after the headmaster shared the Minister's plans with her.

Black had escaped from Azkaban several days earlier.

"Fudge insisted it was for the safety of the school. After all he is a mass murderer." Dumbledore answered simply. The familiar twinkle in his eyes had disappeared as he spoke.

"I've known Black since he was 11. He was one of James' closest friends. He would never have willingly betrayed him or killed anyone. He didn't have it in him like the others who turned dark." McGonagall added emotionally. She always had doubts on that. "Not to mention the fact that he did not even receive a proper trial."

"It was deemed unnecessary to try him since he was found screaming in the streets that he had killed the Potters right after he blew up an entire street of Muggles. There were eyewitnesses on the scene." Dumbledore added as he tipped his half moon spectacles up his crooked nose. "In any event, I definitely feel it is essential that Mr Potter does not learn anything about his godfather. With Harry's past record, I wouldn't put it past him to recklessly pursue the man responsible for getting his parents killed." Dumbledore added as he stood up and walked to the window. Harry Potter's reputation of jumping into places where angels fear to tread is well known. Hearing that Black is capable of mass murder is not likely to deter him from pursuing the betrayer of his parents.

"Very well, I'll relay the plan to Hagrid." She answered as she kept her doubts to herself. She knew it was a fruitless to think that way since she did not have any proof to justify her qualms. She did not like the idea of Hogwarts being guarded by the Dementors, but she had no choice but to accept the inevitable. She excused herself and left the older man to his thoughts.

I am sorry, James, Lily, and Sirius. It was all for the greater good. Dumbledore thought sadly as he slumped into his chair. It was one of those moments when Dumbledore could feel his age.

His deputy's doubts about Sirius's guilt reminded him of the mistake he made many years ago. Black was the sacrificial lamb in this whole battle. Dumbledore could not allow the masses lose their faith in the

government in the defining times after the fall of the Dark Lord. It would be detrimental to the morale of the people if the government could not apprehend the man who betrayed the Potters.

Besides, the real traitor was dead.

Dumbledore was unwilling to lose the respect that he had worked so hard to attain in order to save another man by admitting that he had made a grave error. His error caused the death of the parents of the Boy-Who-Lived. He was the one who suggested that Sirius Black to convince the Potters to change their secret-keeper.

When the Prophecy was made to him in private many years ago, Dumbledore became an instrument of Fate. Sirius was the only threat in uncovering the truth behind the betrayal so he had to be eliminated. Sirius himself provided Dumbledore with the opportunity when he was raving like a lunatic on a public street that he was the cause of his best friend's death. The Wizarding court was unwilling to grant him a trial after he was brought into custody.

Dumbledore sighed. He could only hoped that he would have the chance to repent his grievous faults by ensuring that the Dark Lord would be vanquished in the hands of Harry Potter, the boy he thought was far suited to the role of a Hero than Pure-blooded Neville.

He could not dwell in regret. He had to make sure that his grand plan becomes a success.

Harry was staring at the journals on the desk in their room. He'd always been curious about his parents. This was his a great opportunity to learn more about his parents so he selected the dark blue journal, sat at the desk and began reading.

The journal began from the first day his father, James Potter, entered Hogwarts. He was quickly absorbed in the Journal as he read about the pranks his father and his good friends pulled at Hogwarts. His father had three good friends: Sirius, Remus, and Peter.

Harry smiled at the exciting time his father and his group had in school together.

Harry was proud that trouble seemed to be the middle name for all the Potter men. His father got into trouble a lot. He felt a closer attachment to his Invisibility cloak after learning about the times his father and his friends used it to pull their pranks and escape from trouble.

"I guess formulating a plan to save Norbert was not such a risky operation compared to what your father used to do, huh?" Hermione smiled warmly as she laid a hand on his shoulder.

Harry beamed brightly as he lifted his arm for his wife to snuggle up to him on their bed.

"Do you think Sirius is the same Sirius Black who escaped from Azkaban and Peter is that Peter Pettigrew who tried to stop Black and was blown into pieces? Pettigrew was awarded an Order of Merlin – Third Class for that." Hermione asked as she arose and picked up the day's Daily Prophet from her desk, scanned the newspaper, and returned to the bed to cuddle with Harry. The cover article was about a mass-murderer by the name of Black who had been on the loose for a little while.

"I don't know. He never used their last names." Harry answered as he frowned. It was far too much of a coincidence that both people mentioned in the paper shared the same first names as his father's best friends.

A/N: A new chapter. I'm really curious. Is this story so unoriginal and uninteresting that no one likes to review? Thank you for taking the time to read. Have a great day.

Chapter 5

Beta-read by frustr8dwriter

Birthday celebration!

Harry was feeling very proud of his father and his friends' achievement when he realised that they had successfully transform themselves into animals without supervision while they were still in school. He could imagine the bliss his father, James, must have felt when he finally could turn into a stag after many years of hard work. The first person who could transform successfully was Sirius and his form was a black dog. Peter took the longest to master the skill. With the help of James and Sirius, he finally turned into a rat ,many months after his father could transform into a stag at will. Their pleasure was not derived from their accomplishment – they were happy because they could now accompany their best friend Remus, a werewolf, at every full moon. Harry grinned cheerfully as he read about the exciting adventures of the Marauders, the name his father and his friends had proudly called themselves.

Harry had already read to the entry where his father was finishing his fifth year when he began to feel sleepy. Casually glancing over to the digital clock on the side of the bed, he realised that it was already midnight.

Ah, I should've paid more attention to the time, He thought wearily as he glanced at the other side of the bed. His dark eyebrows knitted into a worried frown when he realized it was still vacant.

Where are you, Hermione? He thought anxiously. Harry was surprised when he sensed a mental wall between the two of them. It was apparent Hermione was hiding something. Now what was it she said about keeping secrets from each other? Harry chuckled.

Suddenly, the sound of wings flapping filled the room and he saw two owls land on the desk. He leapt out of bed and walked over to intercept the mail. One of them was his own pet owl, Hedwig. He had missed her terribly! The last time he's seen her was when she was

ignoring him for upsetting Hermione. Technically, it had only been a few days, but with the House time, it had been more than half a year.

An affectionate smile graced his face. "Thanks girl." Harry said cheerfully as he untied a parcel and an envelope from her extended leg. He knew that Hedwig could feel his pleasure at seeing her again.

You are welcome, Harry. The package is from Ron Weasley. By the way, happy birthday, Harry.

Hedwig affectionately nipped his finger with her beak. Harry was stunned when he heard her thoughts in his head. He finally understood why he could feel another mind-link.

You're my familiar? You can really hear my thoughts and feel my emotions? Harry thought in great excitement as he watched his intelligent familiar for a response.

Haven't you realised that by now? I've been feeling your emotions and hearing you thoughts for quite some time, Harry. Recently, I have been hearing Hermione as well. She is your mate, right? Anyway, I would've flown to you earlier this afternoon, but I was flying back from Egypt. Hedwig answered flatly as she fixed her large amber eyes on him.

Harry frowned as he recalled the events that took place that afternoon. He remembered the emotional scene at the beach. Ah... he thought as the realization set in. Hedwig must've sensed Hermione's intense emotions while she was flying back to London. You felt her anger? Harry thought in astonishment.

Yes. Hedwig thought as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. In fact, Hedwig would've rolled her eyes if she could. She was very upset for quite some time. I would love to know what caused her anger, though I'm pretty confident it has something to do with you. Well, Harry, I'm very tired – I think I'm going to go rest in my cage. We can talk about it tomorrow,

Sure, girl. Harry smiled happily as he affectionately scratched under her beak. He couldn't believe that Hedwig was their familiar. He

mentally kicked himself for not paying enough attention to the 'Guide to Soul Bonds'. He was sure that it must be mentioned some where in the book. Hedwig gave a happy hoot and took off again. Harry was about to turn around and leave when he realised that there was another snowy owl waiting for him to take his mail. He had forgotten about the other owl altogether.

The regal-looking owl had closed his eyes, as if he was sleeping, as he waited for Harry to address him.

"Who might you be from?" Harry asked as he looked at the noble snowy owl. The owl opened his eyes in a rather conceited fashion as he fixed his large yellow eyes on him with apparent distaste.

Can't you just read the letter? An irritated male voice came into his head as the owl held out his leg where three envelopes and a parcel were attached. Harry chuckled as he took the letters and the parcel.

"Thank you." Harry grinned brightly. He remembered that he could speak to animals with the ring.

You're welcome. I'm glad at least you have the manners to thank me after making me wait so long. The owl had added arrogantly as he stared at Harry. I am surprised that you can understand what I am saying.

"I'm so sorry about that." Harry apologised. "I was shocked when I realised I could talk to my owl." Harry explained apologetically. "Would you feel better with a drink of water and some rest?" Harry asked politely, trying to find ways to appease the owl for the wait.

Thank you for the offer, but I'd best get going. The letters are from Hogwarts, by the way. With that, the owl stretched his wings and flew out the window.

What an owl, I don't think I'd ever forget him, Harry thought as he watched the owl disappear into the dark night.

Harry set the two parcels and letters on the desk. Those can wait, he thought. His wife was more important. Harry contemplated shifting to

his wife but since he hadn't tried it before, he didn't feel confident attempting it. Instead, he had to resort to the normal way of finding her - which was patiently searching every room in the house.

He walked out of their bedroom and headed toward the stairs. A smile spread across his face when he saw that the light in the guest room was still on. It was the same room that he'd slept in on the first night and it still held all of his things. The rest of the house was dark, which made him more convinced that Hermione was in that room. The question was: what was she doing in there? It was baffling because Hermione usually worked in their room if he was still awake.

Harry walked to the guest room and gently pushed opened the door. It revealed a brown-haired girl sitting at the desk, currently absorbed in something. Her back was towards the door so he could not see anything. Harry cleared his voice to announce his presence at the door.

"Honey, it's already past midnight. What are you so busy with?" Harry enquired as looked at his wife.

Hermione had stood up and spun sharply around to look at him when she heard his voice.

"Harry! What are you doing here?" She hissed in mild annoyance as she frantically tried to hide what she was working on behind her back. His bright green eyes were shining with amusement when he noticed her nervousness. She grew more anxious as he walked towards her.

"I was getting sleepy and you know I can't fall asleep without hugging my beautiful bride." Harry grinned playfully as he sat on the large bed besides the desk. Hermione was frowning as she mentally back-tracked his words.

"Did you say midnight?" Hermione asked in shock as she checked the clock on the desk.

"Um... Yeah?" Harry replied as he quirked one of his eyebrows questioningly.

"Happy Birthday, Harry!" Hermione exclaimed as she wrapped her arms tightly around his neck and kissed him on the cheek as she happily looked up at him. Her chocolate orbs widened when she saw that Harry was a bit confused.

Harry mentally counted the days and finally realised that it was his birthday today. Hedwig had even wished him a happy birthday a little while ago but he had been too preoccupied to notice.

The look of comprehension came fleetingly upon his face and it was followed by joy.

"Oh, yes. Thank you." Harry smiled warmly.

"You actually forgot about your own birthday?" Hermione asked as she raised her brows in disbelief.

"Well, you know between House time and Real time, I'm a bit confused." Harry admitted nervously as he drew his hand through his messy hair. "Do you realise that means our wedding date was only three days from my birthday?" Harry beamed happily. Well, he could remember their anniversary easier that way. Hermione smiled as she took the present and a card from the table.

Hermione cheerfully gave it to him. "Happy birthday, love. I got this when we were in London. I didn't know what to get you, but I think you'll probably need this." Hermione smiled tenderly as she sat next to him on his bed to watch his reaction.

His emerald eyes had smouldered with contentment when he realised she bought him a present and gave him a card. It was his first birthday card. Dobby has stopped all his mail last year, so he didn't receive any. Harry carefully took the card and read it. Harry sincerely appreciated the gesture - he was grinning like a Cheshire cat and his cheeks were slightly reddened with embarrassment. He gently set the card aside as if it were a priceless treasure and took his present. He had no idea what Hermione had gotten him.

Like a little child, he cautiously unwrapped his present with great anticipation. His eyes twinkled when he saw the brand new seeker's

armour and a Broomstick Servicing Kit. It was very thoughtful of Hermione to get him something so practical. With a dazzling smile on his face, he set the items carefully beside the bed. Then, blissfully, he lifted his wife to his lap and kissed her fully on the lips to express his elation.

Hermione's cheeks pinked from his display of affection

"Thank you, dear. Those were brilliant presents." Harry grinned cheerfully when their lips parted. Hermione had wrapped her arms around his neck as she looked at him affectionately.

"You better make full use of the armour, love. I don't want to visit you in the Hospital Wing every time you play." She smirked as she kissed his nose. Harry placed an arm behind her knees and another arm behind her back as he lifted her up easily. She giggled girlishly at his action.

"It's very late. We should be heading to bed to sleep." Harry grinned rakishly as he gazed at his wife. He could see she was dizzy with delight to be in his arms. He glanced at the presents and the card that were left on the bed. Satisfied that it would not be damaged in any way if he had left them that way for the night, he walked out of the room towards their bedroom, carrying her in bridal-style. She turned off the lights using magic as she laid her head on his chest, enjoying the security and the warmth of his embrace.

The young couple tumbled onto their bed and fell asleep immediately.

The loud, piercing sound of the alarm clock rudely awakened the birthday boy, who was slumbering peacefully in the bed. Harry groaned in irritation as he began to stir. He opened his eyes sleepily, in eager anticipation of seeing the familiar sight of the brunette lying beside him. Instead, he was greeted by an empty space. Harry shot up immediately when he realised that his wife was not beside him. The space beside him was cool to his touch which indicated that she had gotten up really early. It was now 6 a.m., according to the clock.

How long has Hermione been up? Harry thought as he fumbled blindly around searching for his glasses and his holster. He put on his

spectacles and strapped up his holster around his right arm then he climbed out of the bed and went to the bathroom to clean himself up. After he was suitably dressed, he then jogged down the stairs in search of his wife. The lights of the kitchen were switched on and he could hear sounds of a person moving around in the kitchen, so he headed in that direction.

The sight of the kitchen made his jaw drop.

In the middle of the room, wearing an apron and busying herself in the kitchen, was his wife Hermione. Her brown hair was tied neatly into a pony tail as she tried to figure the next step. The cooking area was one great chaotic mess. Anyone could see that although Hermione was brilliant and capable, cooking was definitely not her forte. Harry could not help but smile in amusement when he caught her muttering, in great irritation under her breath, about how the cookbooks didn't teach her how to do this as she tried to break another egg into the bowl. Harry observed that she used too much force cracking the eggs. As a result, some of the errant eggshells ended up in the big mixing bowl. She hissed in annoyance at how much difficulty she was having with such a seemingly easy task.

His heart warmed at the sight of his wife working so diligently. It amused him to learn that his brilliant wife could do everything but cook. There would be time to laugh about it later – at the moment he needed to help her. He rolled up his sleeves and stepped into the kitchen. He looked around until he saw a spoon and a cloth and picked them up.

"Good morning, my love." Harry greeted, giving her a peck on the forehead. "Please allow me, Mione." He smiled warmly as he held up a spoon and used it to scoop out all the eggshells from the bowl and threw them away. He then proceeded to swiftly clean up the mess with the cloth.

"Good morning ,Harry." Hermione added sheepishly as she watched him tidy up efficiently. Her face was slightly red with embarrassment. She quietly moved out of the way so he could finish the job. He completed the task within a minute since he was no stranger to cleaning.

"Let's start everything from scratch. What did you want to make? " Harry asked with an amused smile plastered on his face. He was sure that he was her motivation for stepping into the kitchen at such an early hour and doing something that she had no knowledge of. The simple gesture made his day.

"Well, I was thinking about making something simple like bacon and eggs." Hermione answered softly as she lowered her head in mortification.

Harry stood behind her and put his arms around her as he guided her to take an egg. "I'm going to help you along. Gently crack the egg using the rim of bowl. Don't do hit too hard or it will shatter." He whispered softly into her ear as he demonstrated how to break an egg successfully into the bowl. "I think maybe about eight eggs would be sufficient." Harry said as he released her, giving them a little space so that he could guide her.

Hermione had frowned in concentration as she cracked her first egg. She did it with a bit of difficulty but it got better with her subsequent eggs. Harry felt his heart soar when he saw the exhilaration on her face as she finally learned how to crack an egg properly.

"Scrambled eggs?" Harry asked as he arched his eyebrow questioningly. Hermione nodded. Harry took out some milk, salt, and pepper. "Add the milk in small amounts and whisk it well. Then we will put in a dash of salt and pepper." Harry instructed as he watch Hermione pour the milk and add the seasonings until he approved the amount. Hermione then mixed them well.

"Looking great." He complimented before giving the next instruction. "Please take out a frying pan. Put it on the stove, heat it up, and add a bit of butter." Harry continued as he watched his darling wife proceed to do as he asked. Harry gave her the instructions to finish making the breakfast and occasionally helped her when she needed it. In all, Hermione had prepared the breakfast mainly by herself.

It was seven in the morning when the adults came into the kitchen. The sight of breakfast already laid out on the table and a clean

sparkling kitchen surprised them and they hurriedly joined the teenagers at the table.

Dan and Jean were staring at each other with astonishment when they learned that Hermione had made breakfast for them. Hermione had never cooked before.

"It's Harry's birthday today. I got him a present but I paid for it with his money, so I decided to make breakfast for everyone." Hermione explained.

Harry chuckled loudly as he placed his hand over Hermione's. "Silly Mione, what I have is yours. You can use it whenever you want." Harry replied.

"Happy birthday, Harry." Jean beamed as she stood up, wrapped her arms around him and hugged him. "Hermione did not tell us it was your birthday." Jean smiled. "We'll have to think of something special to do for you today."

"Happy birthday!" Dan added with a warm smile. "Is there any place in particular you'd like to go?"

"I'll be fine with whatever Hermione wants." Harry answered simply since he didn't really know what he could do in the non-magical world.

"Harry, it's your birthday, not mine. You'll have to decide what you want to do. Have you ever been to the amusement park? That's pretty fun." Hermione said as she poured four mugs of coffee for all of them.

"No, I've never been to one. I'd love to go to the amusement park." Harry answered as a soft smile touched his lips.

The adults decided to take them there later that day.

"Let's tuck in. The food is getting cold." Harry added anxiously. He wanted to try her cooking.

The breakfast was slightly overdone but Harry thought it was the best breakfast he'd ever had in his life; and made sure that he let Hermione know by complimenting her after every bite. At the end of the meal, Hermione's face was as red as a tomato from all his praises. He took a piece of bacon for Hedwig and told Hermione about his encounter with the owls last night. She was excited to learn that they shared familiars.

While Hermione went to talk to Hedwig, Harry went to their room to read the mail he had received. One of them was from Ron, who had written to tell him about his trip to Egypt. His family had apparently won some money and had decided to go for a holiday there. He asked if Harry could meet him in Diagon Alley before school starts. Harry smiled when he discovered that Ron had bought him a sneakoscope for his birthday. He set the gift aside.

Harry was not surprised to find that the second parcel was from his first friend, Hagrid. When he opened the parcel, his present – a large book – bit his finger with its sharp teeth. He had no inkling as to why his friend would send him a book that would bite people, but his giant friend's view of an acceptable normal gift was never really normal. Harry belted the book shut so that it would not harm anyone else. He shrugged the matter off after dealing with his wound.

The other two letters were letters from Hogwarts were meant for both Hermione and him. The list of books required for the new term was also enclosed, which meant that they could go shopping for their supplies soon. Harry grabbed all his gifts and walked towards the guest room to where his trunk was. He wanted to put all of the gifts inside his trunk so that they would not get damaged.

Suddenly, he heard his wife's thoughts. Hedwig wanted to get you a present but she knows that you don't know how to appreciate a rat. Hermione thought in deep amusement.

Thank you Hedwig for the thought. Hermione told me that you wanted to give me a rat for my birthday. You can keep the rat for yourself. I know you love it, just remember to dispose of the bones outside, girl. Harry thought in amusement. He was sure that Hedwig could hear him.

Sure, Harry. You should try it sometime. It's really nice. Hedwig answered.

Harry chuckled as he walked into the guest room. Hermione was sitting on the bed with Hedwig perched on her arm. Harry had no doubt that they were still talking to each other. He placed his three gifts and cards carefully into his trunk before joining his wife on the bed. Hedwig was staring at him with her large amber eyes as he fondly tickled the owl. She had hooted in joy. "What are you two talking about?" Harry asked as he wrapped his arm around his wife's shoulder.

"She was telling me about her trip in Egypt. She saw the Great Pyramids while she was flying." Hermione answered. Harry had no idea what she was talking about but he was sure it must be of great historical value.

"Sounds like she had an awesome trip. Anyway, I'm going to change. Dad and Mum are waiting to take us out." Harry said as he stood up. Hedwig flew away from Hermione's arm and landed back in her cage after Hermione stood up.

"We better hurry. I forgot all about that when I was talking to Hedwig. She's delightful company to have." Hermione said as the young couple went back to their room to change.

Harry's green eyes were wide with amazement when he took in the scene of the amusement park. The wide walkways were packed with families or young couples looking excitedly at the assortments of rides. Smell of perspiration and food permeated the air. It was a momentary overload on the senses as he adapted to the noise and smell. Harry had suddenly wished that he had several heads so that he could take in the sights from all directions of the amusement park.

His gaze immediately fell on a particular ride. It looked like a hammer spinning around at a fast velocity from afar. People were suspended in their seats on the open-air ride and experienced a full 360 degree rotation as the hammer swung. Harry could hear people screaming when the Hammer had approached the ground and suddenly rotated

upwards with increasing speed. It looked really exciting and Harry wanted to try it. Hermione had blanched when Harry had pointed the ride out to her. "Love, I want to try that!" Harry said excitedly. He had noticed that his wife paled at the sight of the ride, but he put on his puppy face and pleaded.

Hermione had no resistance to that particular look so she agreed reluctantly as her parents chuckled. "You're lucky that I love you, sir." Hermione said.

Harry eagerly grabbed Hermione's hand and pulled her along to join the queue while the Grangers excused themselves. Apparently, they did not like the ride either.

After a short wait, the young couple got the chance to ride on that machine. They were spun at such a fast speed that it made them dizzy with exhilaration. Harry was shouting excitedly at the point where they had began to fall off their seats as the Hammer tilted forward, as if they were going to crash onto the ground in a rapidly increasing pace. The only thing that kept them from hitting the ground was the thick safety harness that they were wearing. Hermione closed her eyes as she shrieked in fear. Finally, the hammer pulled up after they were vertically above the ground. Harry enjoyed the feeling of falling as adrenaline swamped his body and heightened his senses.

Knowing that the Grangers on the whole preferred less thrilling rides, Harry selected a family ride that they could all go on. They had decided to try their hands on the bumper cars.

Dan was exceptionally skilled at the ride. He could avoid all the crashes neatly and cause others to glide across the smooth black floor when he crashed his car into another's. Harry learnt that causing other car to skid across the floor required the right speed and proper positioning, so he mainly stuck to simple collisions. He had merely bumped the other person into a stop but he had a lot of fun avoiding crashes and crashing into his most of his family. He had no such luck with Dan.

Jean, Hermione and Harry soon grew irritated with Dan when they realised that Dan was out of reach. No matter how much they had tried, they just did not have the ability to crash into him. Dan, on the other hand, had plenty of fun sending their cars skidding across the room with his well executed crashes. The three of them were getting so frustrated that the young couple began to hatch a plan to have their revenge. Harry was sure that Elissa, their teacher for tactics, would be proud of him and Hermione from the way they planned to take retribution from Dan.

They had set the plan in motion when Dan had decided to chase after Harry to crash into his ride. Harry gave Jean and Hermione the signal and they prepared to execute the plan. Harry led Dan on a little chase until Hermione had gained enough speed and was in the correct position. Harry grinned rakishly as he raced towards the accelerating Hermione. Since Harry and Hermione were speeding towards each other directly, Dan could not see Hermione's car because Harry's car had obstructed his view. The crux of the entire plan relied on Harry's skill on the ride. At the last moment, before Hermione could crash into Harry, Harry moved sharply out of the way and Hermione's car crashed directly into Dan's ride, sending his car skidding backwards.

The look on Dan's face was priceless when he realised that the new couple has plotted against him. While Dan was trying to gain control of his car, Jean had happily crashed his ride on the right, sending him skid across the room and Harry finally took his revenge and crashed him when he was running at top speed, finally sending Dan's ride to the middle of the room. Dan's ride had lost all momentum with three maximum velocity crashes and he was laughing heartily at the splendid plan his family executed. The audience who had been watching them play from the start and clapped in approval.

Harry and Hermione, with smiles on their faces, good-naturedly stood up from their cars and took a bow, much to the amusement of everyone who was watching.

Dan mischievously tried to take revenge on his family. However, it was to no avail – every time he tried to chase anyone, someone else would collide with him, cutting his speed.

Once their time was up, Dan humorously caught Harry under his arm and playfully ruffled his hair messily for the trick. The two guys laughed heartily as they walked away from the ride. Hermione and Jean had shrewdly stayed at the back and watched them in amusement. When Harry had finally managed to break away from the friendly tussle, his face was red from all the laughter and his messy raven hair was even more dishevelled than usual.

“That was really fun – I didn’t think I would enjoy colliding with others. Can we try that ride next?” Harry beamed eagerly as he pointed to a Go-kart racing track. It was a huge circuit that snaked through a large plot of land. There were many turns with varying degrees of difficulty. Harry whistled when he spotted several wicked curves. They even had to race up a three-story tower and come racing straight down into a gentle turn. After the making it through the turn, it would be the end of the course. They had four laps to complete in all.

The Grangers didn’t mind putting their driving skills to the test so they agreed and headed off to queue for it.

Since there were eight karts, they had to use the tracks with four other people.

It was the first time for Harry and Hermione to ride a kart, so they had to take a quick course on how to operate the karts after they had donned their helmets. The two teens were assigned the last two karts so that they could learn to control their karts without getting in the way of more experienced kart drivers.

It was easy to grasp the skills and they were soon ready to have their first ride around the racetrack. They got into their respective cars, waited until the traffic light had changed from red to green, and sped off to a great start. Jean and Hermione were rather conservative and they had played by the rules, slowing down before each turn or giving the person who wanted to get ahead a little space to get into the line since they were not supposed to be in the passing lane permanently.

It was a different matter altogether for Harry and Dan. Even though it was the first time that Harry had drove a kart, he was pretty good in gauging his distance. This instinct was honed by his experience as a

seeker, coupled his love of danger. Being a real Gryffindor at heart allowed Harry to overtake most of the other karts, thus putting him in fourth place after only half of the course. Hermione, being influenced by Harry's daring, decided to be more competitive and started overtaking the kart riders after watching Harry do the same. She was trailing behind him since she was given no opportunity to pass him.

Dan was still ahead of Harry and he gave Harry a bit of problem when he doggedly held his position. He wasn't going to give Harry the change to beat him when he could not overtake the person in front of him. Harry decided to be more reckless than usual. When they came to a particularly sharp turn, Harry had switched to the passing lane as he raced along with Dan. Dan was not confident of making the turn without decreasing his speed since it could overturn the flimsy kart so he had to slow down and Harry took the opportunity to cut in. Using his weight to stabilise the whole kart, he did a quick turn at full speed and slipped into the space in front of Dan. The stunt was well pulled off, and he had overtaken Dan. Harry was grinning crazily from exhilaration as he swiftly passed the person in front of him, thus landing him in second place.

Harry had maintained his position of being second until the last lap where he overtook the person who was leading the race at the last minute and finished first. Harry was grinning from ear to ear when he leapt gracefully out of the kart and removed his helmet. The third and fourth karts came swiftly after a while. Hermione was fourth and Dan was third. They were both grinning madly as they joined Harry.

"Daddy passed me at the last minute. I managed to hold on to being third for a while." Hermione explained breathlessly as she smiled. She was pink from the exhilaration.

"Well, I had to let you think I would let you keep the position so you'd let your guard down." Dan grinned playfully as he patted Hermione's head. Hermione was laughing jovially.

"I knew you were going very fast because you were really far ahead. Which position did you take?" Hermione asked as she looked at her husband.

"It was an intense battle for dominance at the helm of race. The person did not give me the opportunity to overtake until nearly the end of the race." Harry beamed broadly.

"You really turned the heat on. When you started to pass the other karts, many of them began racing to the best of their abilities." Dan grinned. It was apparent that Dan also shared a love for speed.

"Which positions did all of you finish in?" Jean asked after she climbed out of the Kart. She came in seventh.

"Harry was first, I came in as third and Hermione was fourth. He's really great at this." Dan beamed brightly as he clapped Harry proudly on the back. "Hermione was really good in maintaining her position too." Dan winked as he placed the other arm snugly around his daughter.

The young couple was red with embarrassment when they heard Dan praising them. It was getting rather late in the afternoon, so they had left the tracks in search of a place to have a late lunch. They picked a family restaurant. After the meal, the Grangers had decided to give the couple time together so they left the place first.

"We'll have to go back to the House soon to start our proper training. After all, Edmund wanted us to join them after my birthday. I suppose that we got a head start, don't you think, love?" Harry asked. When he saw his wife was in agreement, he went on. "Do you think that we can really complete about three years of education before we start our new term in September? I wonder what Edmund wrote in his letter, especially about his advice." Harry said, after the Grangers had left the restaurant. Harry and Hermione and both decided to sit a little longer to chat since they were both too full to move.

"Well, you do remember that Ade can tweak the time in the House? I think she will give us the time we need to complete our education." Hermione answered as she bit her lips and pondered Edmund's suggestions. "As for the advice Edmund gave..."

Keep your true friends close to you. You will be surprised to find jewels in the most unlikely people. Always stay vigilant against all even with those who call themselves your allies...

"I think we will figure it out when we get back to school. Apparently we have false friends around us and that we should keep an open mind and make friends with the most improbable people. Maybe Edmund is trying to hint that around the corner, we will be betrayed by those we now consider friends." Hermione suggested. "Edmund's letter is mostly about how to prepare you for the upcoming battle. The greatest betrayals that can potentially hurt our position in battle would be from people who we have implicit trust in to help us fight of Voldemort."

"Dumbledore fits the profile." Harry answered as he scratched his chin. "We have always looked to Dumbledore to explain things about Voldemort. Edmund also did hint that the battle would take place while we are still teenagers. It must be happening during our Hogwarts years since he is hurrying us to finish our education. I'll hazard a guess that most of the fight will take place on our sixth year since we are to complete our N.E.W.T.s by fifth year." Harry speculated as he took a sip of his drink.

"It could also be due to the fact that you might have a busy fourth year. Well, Ade could always give us the time to complete our N.E.W.T.s by fourth year. At the same time, Edmund might just want to give us time to enjoy being teenagers." Hermione answered as she frowned. "It's all shrouded in mystery, but I think we'll figure it all out in time."

"By the way, Hogwarts' letters came in last night. Ron asked if we could meet at Diagon Alley the day before we leave on the Express." Harry added suddenly. He realised that he had forgotten to tell Hermione about it.

Hermione looked nonplussed.

"Ron asked me at the start of the holidays, love, and I agreed." Hermione replied in confusion. "Oh, I think it is because I never mentioned it to him the last time I replied to him that you were staying

with me.” Hermione replied casually as she sipped her drink. It perplexed Harry that Ron and Hermione had been keeping in contact with each other via owls from the start of their holidays.

“You know that Ron is in Egypt, don’t you? That his family won a lucky draw and had enough money to take them for a holiday?” Harry questioned in a puzzled fashion. Hermione had replied a letter to Ron when he is at Egypt?

“Yes, he told me in a letter before he left. That was one of the reasons why I asked my parents to have you over at our place for the rest of the holidays. I knew that the Weasleys would be in Egypt. Apparently, they are really having a lot of fun.” Harry had stiffened when he heard the answer and unconsciously threw up his mental shields. “Is there something wrong?” Hermione asked worriedly as she observed Harry.

So Hermione had known all about Ron a while before he finally did. She did drop several hints that Ron was having a holiday but he was too distracted to notice.

Harry settled uncomfortably in his seat. “Well, I didn’t think he was contacting either of us much since I’ve only received one letter from him.” Harry answered as he raked his hand through his hair nervously. He could not put a finger on what was exactly wrong. Why had Ron shared everything with Hermione first? Maybe beneath all the bickering, they were really good friends. It was great that they kept in close contact with each other since Hermione doesn't seem to have any other friends but them. However, it was also apparent that Ron had deliberately kept him out of the loop. Ron could have done that to prevent him from getting into trouble with the Dursleys. Harry decided to shrug the thoughts away.

"Harry?" Hermione peered at him with concern as she placed her hand on his.

The frown on Harry's face faded as a warm smile touched his lips. "I'm alright, love. I was just thinking. Let's get going. I need to stretch my muscles."

Harry and Hermione were walking around the amusement park as they watched the other people play. They had enough excitement for the day and wanted to enjoy the rest of the evening just spending time together.

Harry had tried his hand on a midway game but had failed miserably when he tried to aim the target with a simulated gun. It was a simulation of the real rifle and they could win a prize if their score was high. The bullet had missed the mark by a great deal and was awarded zero when his hand jerked from the mild recoil action.

He positioned himself again and aimed once more." I am usually pretty accurate with spell casting." Harry muttered in irritation under his breath and he opened fire. This time it hit the corner of the board. It was awarded 5 points. There was an impish gleam in his eyes as he pondered thoughtfully.

"Harry, it is not a wand. It is a simulated gun. You can't cheat, love." Hermione chuckled in amusement as she watched his eyes narrowed in frustration as he tried it again. Harry growled when the final bullet hit the outer ring of the board and was awarded 15 points. In all, he was awarded 20 points.

"Hermione, why don't you try it? I shouldn't have all the fun." Harry sighed as he handed the gun over to her. He gave the attendant some money so that they could start a new round. Hermione was reluctant initially but she gave in and tried. Hermione stood firmly, legs shoulder-width apart, as she held the gun properly. She aimed carefully as she regulated her breathing. Her chocolate eyes narrowed in concentration as she pulled the trigger. The first bullet had nearly hit the bull's eye. It was awarded 86 points. Harry whistled in appreciation. She shot the next bullet after aiming for a while and once again it hit the outskirts of the red dot. It was awarded 90 points. She fired the last shot and that finally wedged itself in the centre and it was awarded 100 points. In all, she was awarded 276 points. She had missed winning the prize by three points.

"That was brilliant! Was it the first time you tried?" Harry asked incredulously as his emerald orbs widened with excitement. Hermione nodded her head as she blushed in embarrassment.

"It wasn't really that difficult." Hermione added casually as a light smile touched her lips. Hermione had tipped her head up to glaze at Harry. Harry had gently entwined their hands. Harry chuckled as he lifted one of her hand to his lips and brushed them across her knuckles lightly. "I guess it was just too much for me since I only got 20 points. You were great." He beamed lovingly. His eyes were hooded with adoration as he looked into her mocha eyes.

"You were first in the Go-Kart race, love." Hermione smiled meekly. "I guess both of us are good at something here at the amusement park." She affectionately pecked on his lips as she led him away from the stall towards the main entrance with their entwined hands. "It is getting late. I don't think you want to keep Dad and Mum waiting." Harry smiled goofily as he followed Hermione.

They had finally met up with the Grangers near the entrance of the amusement park. They were brought to another family restaurant to eat. The young couple had excitedly shared their experiences at the simulated shooting game. Dan was rather impressed that Hermione could shoot so well. They had just finished their main course and suddenly the lights went off, enshrouding the place in darkness. Someone began singing the birthday song and everyone had joined in as a waiter carrying a lighted birthday cake made a grand entrance.

Wow, someone else shares the same birthday as me. I wonder who it is, He thought as he clapped and sang along. The waiter walked up to their table and set the cake down in front of him. Harry blinked in surprise when he realised that the cake was meant for him and that they were celebrating his birthday! His eyes were stinging when the song ended. So this is how it feels to have a birthday celebration, he thought as tears welled up in his eyes.

"Make three wishes before blowing the candles out, Harry." Jean prompted with a smile. Through the flames he could see that she was smiling.

Harry hurriedly made his wishes and blew out the thirteen candles. He didn't know if wishes could come true, but if they could, he only

wanted one thing – he wished that this joyful moment with his new family would last forever.

Everyone was applauding for him and Harry blushed with embarrassment. The waiter then proceeded to turn on the lights of the restaurant. Jean and Hermione had both hugged him and wished him a “Happy Birthday”.

Dan and Jean exchanged a glance. Dan nodded and Jean proceeded to take the bag sitting between them and placed it on the table.

“This is for you, Harry. It’s a birthday gift from us.” Jean announced affectionately.

This was a bombshell for Harry. Dan and Jean actually took the time to get him a gift?

Dan cleared his voice, unsure of what he should say but he decided to speak from the heart.

“We had no idea what we could get for you since you’re able to afford pretty much everything, so we decided to give you wonderful memories. While we were at the amusement park, we hired someone to take photos of all the unforgettable moments we had there. I believe that this will be the first of many heart-warming memories we’ll have as a family.” Dan said with a fatherly smile as he handed Harry a photo album.

Harry took it lovingly, as he desperately held back his tears. He fingered the cover of the photograph album carefully as if he was afraid of destroying something so precious. Although he was excited, he opened the album slowly. The first page was filled with photographs of him and Hermione on the Hammer ride. Hermione has her eyes closed in fear while he was screaming in pure delight.

He gently flipped through the pages and saw pictures taken at the bumper cars, the go-karts, and even at lunch. There were pictures of all of them laughing as they got their revenge on Dan. The photographer captured the moment on the bumper cars when Harry

swiftly moved out Hermione's way so that she could crash into her dad. There were pictures of them overtaking each other on the Go-Kart tracks, with a great action shot of Harry passing Dan at the crazy turn. There was even a photo of Harry beaming rakishly after peeling his helmet off his head. Harry did not know how dangerous the turn was until he saw the photo and he chuckled.

In every shot, they were all in high spirits and having a lot of fun.

His second album of happy memories with his family, Harry thought emotionally as he gently closed the book. Everyone was watching him expectantly and Harry had begun to tear up. "I really love my gift." Harry answered in an emotion-filled voice. "Thank you so much, Dad and Mum." Harry beamed warmly as tears began to fall. Harry was too touched. Dan protectively wrapped his arms around Harry.

"I'm glad you like it, son." Dan smiled affectionately. Unshed tears in his brown eyes sparkled in the light of the restaurant.

Harry could feel Dan's love and it tugged at his heartstrings. He sobbed into the chest of his father. He had never felt such security in all of his thirteen years. There was not a single dry eye around that table as they watched the moving scene unfold.

A/N: A great thank you for all who reviewed and offered suggestions for the chapter. I thought Harry really deserve a fun day out with his new a good week.

Chapter 6

Beta read by frustr8dwriter

There was a passionate longing in his abnormally dark jade orbs that made her pulse race when she turned around and looked into those eyes. He seemed to be etching the image of her into his mind as his emerald gaze searched her eyes deeply.

Hermione could feel his hesitant and feathery caress on her cheeks as his eyes sought permission to touch her. A soft smile touched her lips as she thought about how courteous he was. She leaned into his touch, feeling his calloused hands on her face. Harry was so gentle with her. She closed her eyes to savour the array of feelings he was evoking with his simple touch. He outlined her lips teasingly as her breathing quickened. Harry had decided to continue the teasing by tracing her jaw line.

“Have I told you how beautiful you are today?” Harry asked huskily as he continued tenderly stroke her cheeks with the back of his hand, enjoying the silkiness of her skin. Harry was standing only an inch away from her and she could smell his clean masculine scent.

“Not in words.” Hermione replied softly. She swallowed visibly when she felt his fingers tracing her lips once again. She was having difficulty keeping coherent thoughts as the passion within grew with each touch.

“You take my breath away.” Harry announced gutturally. He bent his head to take her lips in a seemingly endless, drugging kiss that stole her breath and stunned her into immobility. The kiss was nothing like his touches - it was insistent, demanding, and scalding. It sent desire roaring through her body like a wildfire. His lips moved against hers, with tender yearning, tasting and shaping them, fitting them to his own, then sliding back and forth passionately. Her hands slid up his hard chest and curved fervently around his neck so that she could hold him in that position. Harry broke the kiss with a shaky breath and concentrated on kissing her along the jaw softly as he held her close to him. He reluctantly stopped kissing her and once again looked into her eyes.

"I got too carried away. We need to go to the House." Harry explained breathlessly.

The cloud of passion in her mind had slowly faded and his words finally registered in her mind. "Oh yes." She added absently as she placed a hand on her head. A disorientated Hermione was a rather cute one, Harry thought as he chuckled lightly.

It took Hermione a while to realise that he was laughing at her.

"Harry." She said crossly as she mock-glared at him. "It isn't nice to laugh at your wife."

"I'm sorry, love." Harry smiled as he placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I think we should seriously consider this. Do you think it's possible to bring Hedwig along with us?" Harry asked as he began to pack his bag. He wanted to bring his parent's journals along so that he could read them at the House.

"I'm not sure. I suppose we could always try. Why don't you ask Hedwig to come here?" Hermione answered as she bit her lips.

Before they could call their familiar to join them, a snowy white owl flew into the room and landed on the bedpost. It was Hedwig.

What's wrong? Hedwig asked as she fixed her amber eyes on the two teenagers in the room. Are the two of you going somewhere?

"Technically, we are still going to be in this room. In reality, we will be disappearing into the glass bottle for the rest of the night." Hermione explained as she pointed to the bottle. "Harry wants to take you along but I'm not sure if it can be done. We usually just wish to enter the House and then we find ourselves there."

Why don't I try? Hedwig suggested as she flew to the dresser table where the glass bottle was. She stared at the bottle curiously as she pecked at it. It looks like a normal bottle to me. In any case, I wish to enter the House.

Harry was beaming like a Cheshire cat when he materialised in the House. They had learned two important things: they could bring their things and their familiar into the House. Hedwig was perching proudly on Hermione's shoulder as she fixed her large amber eyes on him.

"I thought you might want to stretch your wings a little. It's huge in here and no one will hurt you." Harry smiled as he affectionately tickled Hedwig under her beak, causing her to hoot with joy. Harry took Hermione's hand and led her to the House.

"Hello, Harry and Hermione. It's nice to see both of you again. By the way, Happy Birthday Harry. Who is this good looking owl?" Edmund asked cheerfully when he had spotted Hedwig.

"She is our familiar, Hedwig." Harry answered happily. Edmund stroked his smooth chin thoughtfully.

"She's definitely your familiar. I can sense that she has your magical signature. This could mean that she might be able to tap into your magic. I've never really heard of owls having a control over magic." Edmund answered as he peered at the owl.

Harry could see the gears in his wife's head moving as she processed his statement.

"Did you say control?" Hermione asked in deep thought.

"Yes, I did. You've thought of something?" Edmund asked inquisitively as his sapphire eyes gleamed with excitement.

"We use a wand to control and direct our magic. We can release accidental magic because we have some control over our core. Is this correct?" Hermione asked as she quirked one of her eyebrows questioningly.

"Yes, you're certainly right. We can use wandless magic when we have a certain control over our magic."

"Wouldn't giving Hedwig something to control the magic aid her in performing spells?" Hermione pondered. "It follows the same principle as using a wand to tap into magic and direct it."

"Why not a ring?" Harry suggested as he looked at his wedding ring. "We don't have to do anything else to cast spells when we use our rings. It would be suitable for Hedwig."

"Good heavens, that's a splendid idea!" Edmund shouted excitedly. "We could try making her a ring to attach to her leg. We'll then see if she can cast spells and fight!"

You mean I can be a fighting, spell casting owl? I think all of you are quite insane. I never heard of owls that fight. Hedwig added and she took off. She wanted to explore the House.

"We'll let you be the first." Harry grinned broadly at the owl. "Anyway, we don't know for sure if you can tap into our cores. There is also the problem of creating a ring to fit that particular purpose." Harry said as he drew his hand through his messily hair thoughtfully.

"We'll do things systematically." Hermione suggested. "First, we will need to design a simple ring that acts as a wand for Hedwig. Then, we can train her to do simple spells."

"How do we know what is not working? We are making an assumption that Hedwig can indeed tap into our magic yet has no control over it." Harry questioned.

"Harry has a valid point. Unless Hedwig does accidental magic, we can't really prove much." Edmund answered dejectedly. "I can't really give you advice since I don't have a familiar."

"Isn't Cathaoir your familiar? It was recorded that he accompanies you all the time." Hermione asked in shock.

"Who is Cathaoir?" Harry inquired curiously.

"It's true that Cathaoir was my loyal companion. He refused to be my familiar because he was waiting for the right wizard to come along."

Griffins are very loyal creatures and they can only become the familiar of a single wizard even though they can live as long as a Phoenix. I'm sure he is out there searching for his wizard. He kept me company because he felt that my aspirations were noble. He wanted help as much as he could to build the magical world." Edmund answered with a distant smile.

"A Griffin? The mystical beast that is part eagle and part lion?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Yes, Harry, Griffins do exist. I think there are only a few." Hermione confirmed. "They are considered mystical creatures in the Magical world since a Griffin helped to create it."

"There is only one left in existence. Cathaoir is the only offspring of the last pair of male and female Griffins. His parents had already died when I met him." Edmund added gravely. "We will move on to more important things. Both of you need another half a year to stabilise your bond, so for the first half of the year, we'll be doing things that don't require magic. I can tell you that our potion master is dying to teach you. At the end of the year, you will sit your mock O.W.L.s in all the subjects that you have received instruction. Elissa will be imparting knowledge on Arithmancy and Ancient Runes this year. She also thinks it is time to brush up on your social skills and etiquette. Toll wants both of you to continue with physical training daily. He might also want to train your familiar. Every day, the timetable in your room will be update accordingly. I will teach you on how to maximise your soul bond." Edmund explained as he drew a chair closer to them and sat down.

"We'll be staying in here for a year?" Harry asked.

"I was thinking of making it two years but I think you might have problems adjusting to the real world that way." Edmund added thoughtfully. "We have plenty of time to get ready before school starts. I don't want both of you to become too powerful over the summer holidays. It'll just attract a lot of unwanted attention. You want your enemy to belittle you because it makes them complacent. Anyway, I'll figure our problem out later. Now, I want the two of you to head to bed. We can talk more tomorrow."

Edmund glanced over at Hermione. She was getting sleepier by the moment, but Harry looked as though he had a question to ask.

“Yes, Edmund – I suppose we’d better get some sleep. We’ll see you tomorrow.” Harry said. He had more he wanted to discuss, but it was not that important. He could see that Hermione could barely keep her eyes open.

Time had passed rather quickly in the House since they were busy every day. They did not have the time to research their pet project. The only time the couple had lessons together was when they had potions, lessons on comportment, and lessons on their soul bond. Edmund had decided to maximise the use of their mind-link by putting them in different classes. They were trained to stretch their area of awareness so that they could pay attention to two lessons at one time. If Hermione had any questions about the classes that Harry was taking, she could ask them through Harry. At the end of the year, the results of their exams had proven that the plan was working - they were more than ready to take their O.W.L for Runes and Arithmancy. The Potion Master, also known as Pot, had a difficult time teaching them at first. Snape had never taught them the proper method of preparing ingredients for potions. Harry had actually prepared them the same way he prepared food, which made Pot crack up in laughter. He had skinned a frog the same way he had skinned a chicken. Hermione was slightly better at it than him since she had read up on the subject. In the end, it was a great accomplishment for Pot. He had managed to cram 5 years of potions into them. At his exam, he was beaming with pride when he had given them ‘O’s for their O.W.L potions at their exam. The potions were perfectly brewed and he could not fault them in any way possible. Harry and Hermione were shocked when they realised they had all the materials in their backyard. They actually grew all the potions ingredients at the House.

Lord and Lady Potter were now more than ready to take their places in the Wizarding World after Elissa had instilled in them all the customs of pureblood wizards. They had now possessed the skills and the knowledge to mingle well with any pureblooded family. Harry could make his way into the political world of the Magical World easily because of his bloodline. His family was seen as an equivalent of a

Royal family in the Wizarding World. The Potters had large stakes in all of the important fields, which made the Potter Family the Magical World's richest. Harry had also become a brilliant dancer. He enjoyed swirling around the room with his beautiful and elegant wife in his arms. They mastered all the Latin dances together.

Harry and Hermione could apparate to each other easily after several lessons with Edmund and they had mutually agreed to inform each other before they did. The strong need to be physically close to each other faded away after half a year had past, signalling that the bond had stabilised. Hermione could feel a greater surge of raw power running through her while Harry realised that he could control his flow of raw power better. They did not have the chance to try their magic since Edmund had excluded all lessons that require magic.

Hedwig had taken an interest in reading and was feeding them useful general information. It took some time for the young couple to get used to the sight of Hedwig reading or flipping through a book when they came back from lessons. It was quite adorable. When Hedwig read, she had a stern expression on her face as she concentrated on her reading. She would slip one of her talons under the pages to flip them and she was able to do that without tearing any of them.

Harry had studied in a Muggle school before and he had seen pictures of wise-looking owls with spectacles on their beaks. So one day, Harry decided to tease her by putting his spectacles on her beak when she was focused on reading. His round lenses spectacles was too small for her large amber eyes. She looked exactly like the owls in the posters. She didn't find this trick amusing. Hedwig had hooted in great irritation and subsequently ignored him for a week.

Hedwig helped Harry unravel the mystery behind his parents' death with her reading. He had finished reading both of his parents' journals. His father had stopped writing in the journal the day before Voldemort came to his house. He learned that the house was placed under a Fidelius charm and that the name of the secret keeper was Peter Pettigrew. He also found out all the last names of his father's closest friends from his mother's journals.

Harry began to connect the dots after that revelation. When he finally understood the purpose of the Fidelius charm, he realised that Peter Pettigrew had betrayed his parents to Voldemort. This had made no sense to Hermione and Harry since they learned from the newspapers that Peter had died when he confronted Sirius Black, the man who allegedly was Voldemort's man. It seemed to be the other way around. Sirius was confronting Voldemort's supporter, Pettigrew for his betrayal of the Potters. This was their speculation since they didn't have an iota of evidence to back up their theory. However, they figured out the one person who would know everything. It was their headmaster, Albus Dumbledore.

Hermione even taught Harry to swim in their large bathtub daily. He became quite adept at swimming after four months of learning. As soon as Harry was more confident in swimming skills, they spent a large amount of their free time swimming in the lake or near the waterfall.

The young couple even had a crash course in healing from Althea, the physical manifestation of the art of healing. They learned to heal most simple injuries since Harry was quite accident-prone. Before they had left for the real world, Toll had reminded them to think of a weapon they wanted to master so that they could begin training the next time they visited.

It was already five in the morning when they had returned to the real world. Harry and Hermione were glad that they had learned Occlumency since it helped them to recall things perfectly.

"Dear," Harry began as he drew her into an embrace thoughtfully. "I worry about Mum and Dad. Edmund is giving us such a thorough education that I completely forgot that we are preparing for a war. Toll reminded me of this when he asked us to pick out a weapon to train with. I know it's a bit early to worry about their safety, but how do we protect them if we are fighting against Voldemort? From all the information that Hedwig had shared with us, he will most likely come after them. Should we start preparing some sort of protection for them?" Harry nuzzled her neck tenderly as he tightened his arms around her waist.

"It's a valid concern, love." Hermione answered as she chewed her bottom lip. "We could ward the house against anyone with the Dark Mark. We need to learn how to do that on our next trip to the House. Talking about parents, we have to speak to Dumbledore about the betrayal. Sirius is your godfather. There must be a reason why your parents trusted him so much."

"It is a puzzle we have to solve. I have a feeling I might have to use my influence as Lord Potter soon but I don't want to reveal our marriage at the same time because people will deduce that we have a soul bond." Harry stated as he scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"You can claim the position of Head of the House as early as the age of eleven. It is really rare but possible since the position of Head of the House of Potter has been vacant for many years. If they do ask, just bring use that explanation. I have a feeling we will get married when I'm 17." Hermione said as she pecked his cheek.

"That was a great suggestion, my brilliant and beautiful wife." He smiled dazzlingly. "I had intended to marry you when we are in our seventh year. However, if I do reveal that I am Lord Potter earlier than I can take you as my wife again in our sixth year." Harry continued with as a frown began to form on his face. "Sometimes, I wonder if I'll be able to keep our marriage a secret that long."

"Why do you feel that way?" Hermione asked incredulously as her mocha-hued eyes widened.

"Well," Harry answered as he raked his raven hair, "Even though you don't seem to notice how attractive you are, other guys do. I might get frustrated if other guys attempt to win your affections. I might accidentally blurt out our marriage to keep them away from you."

Hermione chuckled lightly at his possessiveness. "It's alright that you are slightly overprotective of me since we will be dating. I think I'll have to hex half of the students in Hogwarts just to get them away from you." She added playfully.

“I don’t think I’ll notice if anything happens to them. The only one girl I will ever notice is you, Hermione.” He grinned as he kissed her forehead tenderly. “I don’t see anyone but you.”

His sincere words melted her heart.

“Harry love, I love you so much.” She declared emotionally before she kissed him fondly on his lips.

The rest of their holiday was spent in a fixed manner. They would spend two days in the real world, playing and enjoying their time with Dan and Jean before heading into the House for the night. They had gone to many places together. Dan and Jean had even taken them to France for a large part of their holiday. They were fascinated by the magical world they had found there. Harry’s birthday gift, the album of good memories was quite filled up by the time they had returned from their holiday.

Harry also bought another album to fill up with all the wonderful moments he had spent with his wife. He used the wedding gift that their Professors had given them to make photographs of all his happy memories with Hermione. He even had to purchase several other albums because the first ones were filled. This was his personal project. He wanted to physically record all their memorable times together.

Jean had hung a portrait of the young couple exchanging their kiss at the simple ceremony in their room. The wedding portrait was very meaningful to them since it brought them back to the joyous day they became husband and wife. It was the physical evidence of their marriage in the house.

Jean and Dan loved Harry like a son and he had begun to see them like the parents he never had. The affection they felt for each other was clear when they decided to have a formal family portrait taken together. It was prominently placed at the entrance of their home, proof that Harry was now officially a part of the Granger family.

The rest of Harry and Hermione’s time in the House during the holiday was spent on making sure that their other subjects were at

O.W.L. level as well. Transfiguration became rather easy for them when they were able to the secrets of behind it in Harry's father's journal. Their Transfiguration skills were at N.E.W.T level because of this.

As for rest of the subjects, their instructors made sure that the young couple could easily get an 'outstanding' on their O.W.L.s. They had the time to really teach the two teens the finer details about each subject. Hermione and Harry spend a lot of time thoroughly learning each topic, especially concentrating on the fundamental concepts behind each branch of magic. They were also introduced to other areas of interest like Geography, Politics and Healing - which opened their eyes to the Magical World beyond Magical Britain.

They were also taught some fundamentals of elemental magic. Harry had easily mastered the control of lightning and could effectively use this in battles. The attacks were suitable for dealing with large groups, however it usually drained a lot of power from Harry. Hermione always teased that he mastered it easily because he had a scar that was the shape of a lightning bolt. He was also very good at controlling fire – a great advantage in one-on-one battles. Hermione, on the other hand, was a master in controlling wind. Her power was used effectively to stun or throw large groups of enemies back. She could rely on her water element to attack.

They had constant duelling against simulated figures to sharpen their skills. Their duelling master was very pleased with their individual progress. They had mastered the art of not verbalising their spells. This skill would give them a huge advantage in battle because their opponent would not be able to tell which spells they were going to use. They had incorporated the use of the other subjects in their duelling too. They could conjure towers of soil or metal to shield them from powerful attacks. Occasionally, they made shields of elements. Lightning and fire were more suitable for offensive attacks but earth, water, and wind made very good shields.

However, Harry and Hermione only managed to scrape through his weapon training. Toll had made them try various weapons to find the suitable one for them. He had also given them weapons based on their prominent traits. Harry was more suitable for a light blade or

blunt weapon because of his recklessness and courage yet Toll could not find just the right weapon for him. Hermione, on the other hand, was more suited to range weapons because she could assess the situation and react accordingly. Toll let her try bows and throwing weapons but none of them really fit her, either.

The young couple's love for each other grew steadily as they got to know each other better. After all, with real time and House time combined, they had spent at least a decade together. It took them this amount of time to be completely comfortable with each other. In terms of their physical relationship, they still had much to explore since both of them were satisfied with just simple kisses and hugs.

During the last week of their summer holiday, Harry and Hermione visited Dumbledore to inform him of their decision to take their O. in secret that year. Dumbledore was surprised that they had made the request. He knew that they were both brilliant, but was unsure if they were skilled enough to skip that many years. He compromised and agreed to permit them to take the examinations if their teachers concurred that they were ready. Harry argued that Snape would judge them unfairly since it was well known that Snape did not like him very much. Dumbledore made the decision to test them in Potions. If all went as planned, they would be tested on all the subjects they were planning to sit O.W.L.s for during the first week of their school term.

Harry introduced Hermione to Dobby after he had summoned him to discuss the properties he owned. Dobby was dressed better and was also able to speak better because he had spent his free time learning. Harry was glad to hear that his properties were in good condition since the house elves had maintained them well. He made it a point to visit them in the near future.

Soon, it was the last day of the holiday. Dan and Jean had dropped them off at Diagon Alley since they had to go to a convention. After sharing hugs with their daughter and son-in-law, they all promised to write to each other frequently.

Harry and Hermione were feeling a little anxious about starting their third year at Hogwarts and more importantly, going back to the

Magical world. Harry was the Boy-Who-Lived and his actions would get a lot of attention from the wizards in Magical Britain.

Both of them agreed to only start 'dating' while they were in Hogwarts because it would reduce the speed exposure to the public. It would be an open declaration of their relationship in the Magical World if they were seen holding hands in Diagon Alley because it would probably make the headlines. The young couple had to pay a lot of attention to their usage of magic too. They had to keep up appearances. Hermione and Harry were only supposed to be friends so they could not be too physically close to each other. It was rather difficult for them to make a conscious effort to be apart since they'd been attached at the hip since they were married.

Harry and Hermione had booked two rooms at Leaky Cauldron for appearance's sake. After that, they began their shopping for their third year items. The first things they decided to purchase were better trunks. They needed to keep more clothes, books, potions ingredients, potions, and maybe even weapons handy. The trunks they wanted had extra storage, were magically fixed at a certain weight, and could be shrunk with a tap of a wand. Harry shrank their new trunks to the size of matchboxes and placed them in his pocket as they left the store. Harry and Hermione also purchased new robes for the new school term since they both had grown quite a bit. Harry had dutifully stowed them away.

Their next stop was Quality Quidditch Supplies to look at brooms. Hermione could now fly rather well ever since they had trained with a flying instructor. The instructor had even corrected some of Harry's moves so that he could achieve more speed. Hermione needed a broom to continue practising with in the real world. A large crowd of people were standing in front of the shop, ogling at the display. Being curious, both of them went over to see what the fuss was about. Hermione instantly regretted her decision because it took her a long time to pull Harry away from the broom display.

He was ogling a Firebolt, a new broom on the market. She could tell from the description of the broom that it was an excellent racing broom but she did not understand his obsession with it. Harry had even wanted to buy the broom, but was convinced otherwise at the

last minute. Hermione had reminded him that he already had a good racing broom. Both of them made their way to get their books for school without purchasing a broom.

They had decided to take all the electives so they bought a lot of books. Harry was glad that he had thought of buying their trunks first so that they didn't need to lug six bags of books around. He took the two trunks from his pocket, enlarged them and placed their books into the library section of their trunks separately, before shrinking them once again into the size of a matchbox and placing them back into his pocket. Hermione, for once, did not buy any additional books since Edmund owned a copy of all books she would need.

Harry also bought two unbreakable satchels to hold more books. Harry had even charmed them to always weigh the same and stay light. Hermione placed another charm on the satchels to ensure that only Harry or Hermione could open them.

Harry and Hermione decided to grab some ice cream at Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour after their shopping. They didn't have to carry anything with them because Harry had stored everything in their trunks.

"Daddy gave me ten galleons to get a birthday present. Harry, what do you think I should get?" Hermione asked thoughtfully as she looked around the street. She did not want another book since she could probably find the book in Edmund's vast library. Harry was too frustrated by their lack of contact to answer her. He was about to suggest that they go back to their rooms when they heard someone shouting their names.

"Harry! Hermione!"

Ron, looking very freckly, was approaching them. He was as lanky as usual and Harry was sure that the redhead must have grown several inches over the holidays. Ron had known that Harry was staying with Hermione because Hermione written him over the holidays to let him know. Ron's eyes had widened in shock when he got a good look at his two friends.

"Blimey, is that you? Both of you look so different. What did you do in the holidays?" Ron asked as he gasped. He could not take his eyes off the newly improved Hermione. Hermione looked very different in a good way. She was carrying herself with more confidence and poise and she was radiating joy. To sum it all, she was beautiful.

"Well, I've told you in our letters. We've been to France." Hermione added as she looked at her unusually quiet husband. She was surprised to see that he was even taller than Ron. His emerald eyes flashed mild irritation as he looked at his pal.

Harry did not like the way his good friend's eyes were lingering on his wife for a long time.

He cleared his voice and stepped between them. "Ron, have you got your books?" Harry asked flatly. "We'll be on the Hogwarts Express tomorrow." Harry knew it was stupid to get so protective over Hermione with Ron, but he could not help it. He was not happy with the way Ron was looking at her.

"Mom's getting my supplies with the rest of the family's. I wanted to look for both of you. How about you?" Ron answered as he grinned broadly. Harry smiled with a bit more warmth.

"We've already bought our books. We were thinking of going to buy a pet. " Hermione answered as she beamed when she realised that Harry was not getting jealous. I decided on getting another pet since we got an owl.

"I need to get Scabbers to get checked, too. The air in Egypt didn't seem to agree with him." Ron stated as he fished a rat out of his pocket. Scabbers looked as if he had lost a lot of weight and he did not look well at all.

Harry spotted a magical creature shop a short distance away from them. "Let's head there, then."

Harry had to shove his hands into his pockets when he realised that he had instinctively reached out to hold Hermione's hand. She had

turned around when she felt his hand brushing against her hand. Hermione could read his frustration in his emerald eyes.

I am digging my own grave when I said I wanted to keep our marriage a secret. Harry thought in deep frustration as he frowned. Hermione had to stop herself from bursting into laughter but he could tell that she was very amused by his behaviour. Ron was too absorbed in recollecting his trip in Egypt to notice their exchange of looks.

Ron proceeded to the counter to have someone to look at Scabbers while Harry and Hermione began to look at the assortment of creatures in cages together. Hermione wanted to make sure that she got a pet that was okay with Harry too since they were married.

Find anyone that you liked? Harry asked thoughtfully as he peered at a snake. It was a bright green and it was looking curiously at Harry. Before she could think of an answer, they heard a loud "Ouch!" There was a loud commotion in the store as the witch attempted to catch something. All they could hear was the crashing of a cage and the furious spitting of a cat. Someone had screamed "No, Crookshanks, no!" Suddenly, Ron dashed out of the store.

"I'll be back." Harry told his wife as he dashed after Ron.

"Scabbers went missing." Ron said anxiously as he began hunting every corner for his pet. Harry knew it was a waste of time to search for Scabbers by checking every corner so he summoned the rat. Harry accio-ed the trembling rat to his right hand and pretended to find him a little bit down the street.

He handed the rat back to Ron and he happily stuffed the rat into his pocket. It was then did he hear his wife's voice. I found the right one, love. He is beautiful. Harry could hear Hermione purring in joy.

I'll be there soon. Ron found Scabbers.

Harry jogged hurriedly back to the store. Hermione was standing at the counter staring cheerfully at a cat. It was a rather large cat. His ginger fur was thick and fluffy and it looked a bit bow-legged. Despite

his grumpy appearance, Harry found himself liking the pet that Hermione had chosen.

"Isn't he beautiful? His name is Crookshanks. Do you think we can keep him?" Hermione asked excitedly when Harry approached the cat. Crookshanks was staring at him intently with his yellow eyes. Harry smiled as he extended his hand to pet the cat. Crookshanks obviously liked him because he allowed Harry to stroke his fur as he purred.

"We'll take him." Harry answered firmly as Hermione blissfully carried Crookshanks by wrapping her arms around him. Harry bought several toys that Crookshanks could entertain himself with and as well as some food. Hermione already left with the cat and had exited the store. He also took the rat tonic that Ron had left on the counter.

Harry carried all the items easily and went out to join them. Hermione was standing in front of Ron with Crookshanks in her arms. Ron was staring at Crookshanks with his mouth hanging open. "You bought that monster?"

"He is gorgeous, isn't he? "

"Hermione, that thing nearly scalped me!" Ron shrieked."How about Scabbers? He needs rest and relaxation!"

"I don't see what the problem is since Crookshanks will be staying in my dormitory while Scabbers will be staying at yours." Hermione added gruffly. She was slightly insulted that he had called her cat a monster.

Harry was now beside his wife. "I think Crookshanks is gorgeous. He is a cat and cats chase rats. If you keep Scabbers out of his sight, there shouldn't be a problem." Harry declared as he gently scratched Crookshanks behind his ears as he purred in bliss. "Here Ron, you left your rat tonic on the counter. Anyway, I think it's getting better head back." Harry said as he checked his watch.

When the trio finally returned to the Leaky Cauldron, they found Mr. Weasley sitting at the bar, reading the Daily Prophet. "Harry and

Hermione, both of you look really good.” He said, smiling as he looked up, immediately folding the paper and placing it neatly aside. “How are you?”

“I’ve never been better.” Harry smiled as he instinctively pulled a chair out for Hermione to sit in.

“I’m fine, thank you. Mr. Weasley” She answered politely. Hermione had given Harry a dazzling smile when he pushed her chair in. He placed their items aside as he joined all of them at the table.

“That was a nice gesture, Harry.” Mr. Weasley said approvingly. Harry had blushed slightly from the compliment. At that moment, the rest of the Weasley family joined them.

Mrs. Weasley was carrying a large bag of shopping when she entered the place. “Harry, what’s happened to you?” Mrs. Weasley asked in astonishment as she stared at him. Harry knew that he’d changed but he felt that it didn’t warrant such a large reaction. “You look much better. Did your family decided to feed you properly?”

Harry had to hold back the remark that his new family was treating him well. “I was staying with Hermione’s family. They treated me very nicely.” He smiled sincerely as he stood up to help Mrs. Weasley with the shopping. He placed them on an empty chair effortlessly before sitting down. The only girl in the family, Ginny, had muttered a shy ‘hello’ before turning very red. Harry assumed that she was feeling shy since he had saved her life last year.

Percy, the third oldest son in the family, had greeted him formally. Harry knew that Percy was the Head Boy this year. Since Elissa had trained him quite well in the protocols of the society in the Magical World, Harry shook Percy’s hand back with an equal gravity that surprised Percy. Harry knew that he was supposed be the one to extend his hand since he was a scion of the Ancient and Noble house of Potter and Percy was merely the third son of a Noble house. He didn’t have a chance to raise the matter up because Fred and George began teasing Percy by exaggerating his greeting of Harry. They shoved a surprised Percy aside and began shaking Harry’s hand furiously as if it was the first time they had met each other. The scene

made Harry chuckle with laughter but Mrs. Weasley admonished them curtly.

Lord Potter, I can see that you remembered Elissa's teachings. Hermione noted with approval as she watched the Weasleys interact with each other. It was chaotic whenever the Weasley were together since they were such a large family.

Milady, do you think I was given a choice? Elissa had literally knocked it into my head. Besides, if I didn't remember what she taught me, she'd just increased the time I had to spend on the subject, which meant I spent less time dancing with you. Naturally I did it as fast as I could.

I didn't think you like dancing that much at first. Hermione thought in amusement.

I didn't until I saw certain benefits. Dancing provides me with the chance to hold you close to me. He added as he glanced at her meaningfully when he sat down.

Hermione had to lower her head to hide the flush on her cheeks. Harry decided to lay off on the teasing until they were alone.

It was soon dinnertime and all of them decided to take the meal together. Tom had placed three tables together so that they could all eat together.

Dinner would've been a very enjoyable affair if Harry hadn't caught Ron staring at Hermione so frequently. He enjoyed the pranks the twins had played on Percy. Percy was even haughtier than usual because of his new post. They were pranksters through and through and they added a lot of life to the meal. However, Ron's constant attention to his wife was making him irritated. He thought that Ron had gotten over it since he stopped sneaking glances at Hermione while they were shopping, but Harry was wrong. With Hermione placed conveniently at his right, Ron had constantly tried to engage Hermione in a private conversation. When the last course of the meal was finally served, Harry felt he'd breaking point of his patience and decided to excuse himself from the table.

“Sorry for interrupting, but I’m calling it a day. Good night, everyone.” Harry smiled as warmly as he could muster and stood up. He took the napkin from his lap and placed it on the table beside his untouched chocolate dessert. The rest of the occupants had answered “good night”.

He took the things he bought for Crookshanks. “Come, Crookshanks.” Harry called as he knelt down for the cat to jump into his arms. For a rather large cat, he was considerably nimble. With the large purring cat and the shopping bags in his arms, he headed up to his room. He didn’t notice the appreciative stares from all the females in the room as he walked by.

Harry gently placed Crookshanks on his bed as he placed the shopping aside. Hermione would apparate to his room later after her shower to collect her things. Harry realised that he had to pack his things into his new trunk so he sat down and began his task. Crookshanks was staring at him intently as he used magic to get everything in the trunk neatly. He shrunk the old standard school trunk and placed it inside his new trunk because he wanted to try some charms on it.

“I’m finally done.” Harry announced as he turned around to look at Crookshanks.

“Hi, Crookshanks. I’m Harry Potter.” Harry smiled briefly as he stroked the cat.

Nice to meet you, Harry. I didn’t think would ever rescue me from that place. I’ve been there for ages. Are you my mistress’ mate? You looked very irritated when that red-haired two- legged creature got close to her. Crookshanks said casually as he licked his paws. He is really rude. He actually called me a monster. It was obvious that he did not like Ron because of that comment.

“I am her mate. I think Ron said that out of anger because you jumped on his head and chased his rat away.” He raked a hand through his raven hair as a small smile touched his lips.

That wasn't a rat. In fact, he smelled like you or my mistress. He is a two-legged like you. Crookshanks answered as he started to wash his face. Harry was staring at him in astonishment.

Scabbers is a wizard? Ron had said that Scabbers had been in the family for a long time and had most likely out live the normal life span of a normal garden rat. Why would a wizard choose to live as a rat?

Crookshanks was peering at him intently as if he was trying to read the emotions on his face. I guess that you are surprised?

The white snowy owl that had flown into the cage distracted Crookshanks. He stood up and leapt on his table where Hedwig was perching in her cage. He was very curious about Hedwig and was observing her closely. Hedwig had noticed the new pet and had hopped out of the cage to take a better look at him.

It was quite unnerving to watch the two animals in a staring match. Crookshanks was fixing his yellow eyes on Hedwig and Hedwig was staring at him with her large amber eyes. Minutes passed and there were no winner. In the end, Crookshanks lost because he had blinked and he leapt sullenly off the table to the floor. Hedwig, on the other hand, was hooting in glee.

"Well, I guess that was a good start." Harry said to both of them. "Do both of you want to go hunting or would you rather have some treats?" Harry asked as he looked at the two pets.

I've caught some mice just now. I am fine. You should ask the cat though. He looks like a mix between a cat and a Kneazle. Hedwig answered as she fixed her large amber eyes on him.

I am not going to have a staring match with you, Hedwig. I realised you can stare without blinking for ten minutes. His name is Crookshanks. He is Hermione's pet. Harry added as he grinned.

Spoilsport, maybe I ask Hermione later. She answered happily as she hopped into her cage.

"How about you, Crookshanks?" Harry asked as he sat next to him. He was looking grumpier than usual.

I can't believe I lost to an owl. I don't mind some treats. Crookshanks answered glumly. Harry wrapped his hand around his belly and lifted him to his lap. He gently scratched him until he started mewling in joy. He summoned some packets of treats for him and Crookshanks was finally in a good mood.

Hermione had finally appeared in his room after he had finished half of his book on duelling. Crookshanks was sleeping peacefully on his stomach as he scratched the cat to sleep. Harry had glanced up from his book and realised that she already had her shower. "I already cast a silencio spell when I came in. I had a nice chat with Crookshanks." Harry smiled as he set the book aside and raised his arm for her to join him.

Hermione was smiling brilliantly as she took in the scene. It was so adorable to see Crookshanks sleeping peacefully on Harry's stomach.

"I think you are spoiling him." Hermione added as she leaned in carefully, in fear of squashing her new pet and pecked Harry on the lips. This sudden movement rudely awakened Crookshanks and he prudently leapt off the bed to find a nicer place to sleep. Harry immediately pulled her close to him. Hermione had tumbled onto him, giggling as her wet brown hair spilled all around him. He gently captured her lips in a soft kiss as he rolled her to her back. Harry was now on top of her. Her warm chocolate gaze met his loving emerald eyes. Hermione reached out and gently stroked his cheeks before she pulled his face down to her and kissed him tenderly. Harry was smiling in contentment as he lay on his back and pulled his wife closer to him.

"The pets had a staring contest just now and Hedwig won. I think it's because she got the biggest eyes. Crookshanks was a bit upset but he was pacified later with treats. By the way, he knows that we are married." Harry grinned. "He is a very intelligent pet. He says that Scabbers is a wizard." Harry summarised lazily as he leaned over to brush his lips on her head.

"I was vaguely aware of it. It sounds pretty funny. I could feel your amusement when they were staring at each other. Anyway, to prove that Crookshanks is telling the truth, we could always use a spell to reverse the transformation. Although I don't think that it'll do us any good to reveal the person right now because we know nothing about his motives. Were you listening to the conversation going on downstairs? We'll be going to King Cross Station by Ministry cars. Are you really that tired?" Hermione asked as she turned to look at Harry. He had folded his arms behind his neck as he watched her intently.

"No." He answered flatly as his emerald eyes hardened in irritation. "I didn't like the way Ron was looking at you during dinner. Since I can't do anything to stop him, I decided to retire early for the night."

Harry went on in great annoyance as he drew his hand through his hair. "He doesn't look at you like a friend. I know it's stupid to feel that way about my friend."

"It is perfectly fine for you to feel this way. I think everything will be alright when you tell him that we are together tomorrow." Hermione assured as she snuggled up his chest. "We'll take it from there. I can't wait to leave Diagon Alley so that we can at least start pretending that we are dating in school." Hermione smiled as she closed her eyes. "Do you know that Ginny was admiring you the entire time we were eating?" She said sleepily, as she placed her cheek on his chest. His strong steady heartbeat was a lullaby to her, luring her to sleep. Her eyelids were feeling heavier by the minute.

"And she is still breathing?" Harry joked softly as he pressed a tender kiss on her head. Her hair was still slightly damp from the shower so Harry cast a drying spell on it.

"She didn't attempt to flirt with you, so it was alright. Besides, we were supposed to be platonic friends right now." Hermione answered with a yawn as she switched all the lights in the room off by magic.

"Good night, my dear." Harry muttered sleepily. Harry had only followed suit after he made sure his wife was asleep.

Hermione had awakened early to a sight she loved to see in the morning. Harry was still sleeping peacefully. His black hair was even messier than usual. He was still awfully fair even after all the time they had spent in the sun. Harry loved to sleep in his boxers and had only begun sleeping this way after they became very comfortable with each other. Her eyes trailed down to his bare torso. He was now very well built and Hermione could not help admiring his body.

Harry had began to stir and he had greeted her with a drowsily smile when he realised that his wife was staring at him. Hermione had passed him his spectacles and he put them on. "Good morning, dear. I am glad that you like what you see." He smiled mischievously as he kissed her lips playfully. He climbed out of his bed to wash up as his wife stared at his body approvingly. "I think you need to hurry over to your room before they realise that you have been sleeping on my bed. It's barely 5 so I don't think they will wake up that early. Catch some sleep if you want. I'm heading down for a run down on the Muggle street." Harry said.

"I'll see you later." Hermione gave him a quick kiss on his lips before heading back to her room with Crookshanks on her heels. Harry hurriedly changed into a shirt and running shorts.

I'll help you pack. I took only a few minutes.

I'm done. Can you wait for me? I want to get out for a run too.

The Weasley family had only awakened after Harry and Hermione finished their breakfast. Harry and Hermione had their shower before heading down for a meal, so they were fully dressed in Muggle clothes. They had watched the chaos unfolding in Leaky Cauldron as the Weasley family scrambled to get ready.

That is one reason why we should never have a huge family. It is totally chaotic! Hermione thought realistically as she sipped her tea. It will be so difficult to manage. Can you imagine preparing five children to go to school?

Well, it is only once a year, Hermione. I can always help out too. Harry thought as he watched them running around frantically trying to

get their stuff prepared. Mrs. Weasley was in a bad temper since Percy and Ron were quarrelling and she was still busy with preparing sandwiches for her children. With your organisation skills, I think you will get our children ready in no time while I prepare their food. Harry beamed brightly.

Harry and Hermione had left the task of getting their pets into their carriers until the last minute. Harry had tried giving his owl some treats but she was too smart to be enticed by it and refused to go into the cage without a fight. Thus, Harry had an argument with Hedwig in his mind. She did not understand why she could not fly and meet him at platform nine three quarters.

I can teach you to get to the platform but can you imagine what people might say if they see an owl flying to a train station in the day then disappearing? I know Toll has trained you well. I don't want you to attempt to fly to Scotland from here. I will let you out of the cage when we get into the train. Harry thought firmly as he pointed to the cage.

Hedwig had unwillingly got into her cage after that. Hermione did not meet with so much resistance from Crookshanks. He was unhappy to get in but he finally did after she gave him some treats.

They reached Platform nine and three quarters without much fuss. There were a lot of witches and wizards at the platform sending their children off. The Hogwarts Express, a grand bright red train was letting off steam when they had arrived. They had only ten minutes left when Mr. Weasley expressed an interest to speak to him about a pressing matter.

Harry reluctantly gave his trunk and his cage to Hermione. Ron, Ginny, and Hermione boarded the train to find an empty compartment to sit in.

"I know that the Minister does not want me to share this with you. Have you heard of a prisoner by the name of Sirius Black?" Mr. Weasley asked anxiously.

"Naturally, it was all over the news daily."

“Yes. Sirius Black has escaped from prison to look for you. Most reckon that he was trying to avenge You-know-who’s downfall by murdering you. There are protections in place in Hogwarts to prevent him from getting to you. You must promise me that you will not look for him as you start the term, no matter what. ” He said urgently, as the final boarding call was announced.

Harry was secretly glad that Sirius was looking for him since he now had the opportunity to finally meet him. “Thank you for the information. I’ll be safe. I’ll see you next year.” Harry added with a smile as he ran onto the train just before the train began to accelerate.

A/N:Hi, Thank you for reading.I thought it was well edited. Thanks,frustr8dwriter. Well, I hope you like the chapter, it was more of a filler. Please comment. Have a nice week.

Chapter 7

Beta read by frustr8dwriter.

The conversation he had with Mr. Weasley was weighing heavily on his mind as Harry absentmindedly checked every compartment on Hogwarts Express for his companions. The pieces of the puzzle of his parents' betrayal were beginning to fall in place. However, he had lacked several vital pieces to complete the picture. He needed to know the real reason for Sirius' imprisonment. To the best of his knowledge, Sirius was not given any trial for the offences for which he was punished. This was odd since even well known mass-murderers like the Lestranges were given a trial and they had murdered more innocents than Sirius, suggesting there was more to it than it meets the eye.

In the last compartment at the end of the train, Harry found Hermione, Ron, and Ginny talking in a hushed conversation. Before Harry could ask about their peculiar behaviour, he realised the reason for their quiet tones: an adult in frayed wizard robes was sleeping soundly near the window, beside Ron. His emerald orbs widened fleetingly in surprise as he stared at the slumbering figure. Hogwarts Express usually only carried students since most of the staff resided in the Castle. It was unusual to see an adult aboard.

Harry could tell that man was rather young from the soft lines of his face even though he seemed like he was a bit under the weather. He looked as if he had been through the mill, with tired lines etched deeply on his youthful face and some grey hair flecking his soft russet hair. Harry turned to face Hermione and shot her a questioning look.

"The other compartments were packed. He was already in here sleeping when we came in. I think he is our new professor." Hermione whispered as Harry joined them by sitting next to Hermione and near the door. He was sitting opposite Ginny and Ron.

Harry could see the peeling letters of "Professor R.J. Lupin" on the briefcase the man was using as support. His green eyes widened at the initials. Could it be? Harry thought as he peered closer at the

sleeping form. The man was of the right age, too. Could he be Remus Lupin?

It would be too much of a coincidence, dear. Hermione thought as she flicked a quick glance at him to casually read his expression before returning her attention to the thick book on Defence Against the Dark Arts. Ron was scrutinizing the man carefully. "He looks too shabby and weak for a professor, don't you reckon? Wonder what subject he teaches." Ron asked as he frowned.

"Defence Against the Dark Arts." Harry answered plainly as he shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Harry crossed his leg and turned slightly away from the door so that he was facing Ron and could avoid meeting Ginny's overly passionate stare. The intensity of her gaze was unnerving him.

When Harry moved, Hermione, who was very absorbed with her book, unconsciously shifted slightly to give him the space to adjust. Their synchronized actions did not go unnoticed by the Weasley siblings and Ron and Ginny exchanged surprised glances.

"Is something wrong? You're distracting me from my reading with all this staring." Hermione snapped with her brows knitted together in a frown as she lifted her face from the book. She was glaring at Ron with mild annoyance.

"Nothing," Ron quickly responded, averting his glance sheepishly as his ears turned pink. Ginny sharply turned her eyes away from Harry and Hermione and began watching the countryside speeding past them from the window, frowning in deep thought. She could not put her finger on what exactly was different between Harry and Hermione. All she knew was that they didn't seem to be merely just friends.

The silence in the compartment was broken when Harry heaved a soft sigh of relief and attempted to relax. Hermione turned and she shot him a questioning look.

I'm fine. Ginny's just making me uncomfortable with all her gawking. Harry thought resignedly. He raked his hand through his untidy black hair nervously. A 60-foot Basilisk did not frighten him as much as this

twelve year-old girl's stare. The irony was not lost on him as he pulled his collar tensely.

Do you think you should tell them now? Hermione asked, looking at him intently. Before he could answer her, their friend had spoken.

"So, why did Dad pull you aside to talk?" Ron asked curiously.

"Mr. Weasley wanted to talk to me about the prisoner that had escaped from Azkaban, Sirius Black." Harry answered honestly. He was momentarily distracted by the abruptness of his wife sitting up with alarm. He realised that his wife did not know the contents of the talk because she had politely given him privacy when Mr. Weasley pulled him aside for a chat. Harry held back the urge to squeeze her hand in deep appreciation and settled for a small smile to show his gratitude for Hermione's thoughtfulness.

"The mass-murderer Sirius Black? He was all over the news. Everyone's been talking about him." Ron exclaimed loudly. Hermione was about to warn him about the volume of his voice when Professor Lupin suddenly stirred slightly. The four teenagers held their breath as they watched him apprehensively. The person of interest had obviously turned his head aside and continued to slumber peacefully. The four teenagers gave sighs of relief and began to breathe normally.

Ron had a slightly chagrined look as he leaned closer and whispered, "Why did Dad wanted to speak to you about Black for?"

Harry merely shrugged nonchalantly as he answered. "The Ministry reckons that he is coming after me. Your dad doesn't want me to go looking for trouble."

"Oh." Ron answered as he wrinkled his brow in thought. It was a rare expression for Ron. Ginny, however, was watching at him with concern written all over her face.

We know that Black isn't Tom Riddle's supporter, so he wouldn't hurt you. Isn't this a good opportunity to talk to Sirius about the betrayal of

your parents? He would probably know the details of it. Hermione thought as she bit her lips.

I was thinking along the same lines too, Hermione. We got to find him quick because you don't want the Ministry to come after him. I am sure the Ministry would have placed some guards in Hogwarts to apprehend him. Harry answered thoughtfully as he kept his face void of emotions.

"I'm sure if Harry does not look for trouble, we'll all be safe. After all, Professor Dumbledore is around." Hermione concluded in an assuring manner as she returned her attention to her book.

"But..." Ginny protested with worry. The events that took place in her first year crept into her mind.

"If Hermione says so, then we have nothing to worry about. After all, Hermione's always right." Ron interrupted as he stared at Hermione with a gleam in his eyes. Ginny decided to remain silent after seeing the expression on Ron's face.

Hermione's cheeks had turned slightly pink at his compliment.

The expression on Ron's face made Harry fold his arms across his chest in annoyance as he raised one of his eyebrows. The muscles on his arms had bulged threateningly out from the simple action. The clueless redhead continued to stare at Hermione closely, further infuriating the bespectacled boy.

Hermione had cast a probing side-glance at Harry when she felt his impatience.

He's staring at you again. He thought gruffly. Harry could hear the slightly amused chuckle of his familiar, Hedwig.

What is with guys being territorial? Hedwig thought with mild glee. She had a clear view of everything that was taking place in the compartment from her cage.

It has nothing to do with that, Hedwig. I just don't like him staring at my wife like that.

Aren't you trying to assert your claim over her, Harry? Just admit it. Hedwig added in an assuming manner.

I hate to be verbally beaten by an owl. Harry added in defeat. I'm just glad that it's by a stunning and intelligent owl that reads as extensively as my brilliant and dazzling wife.

Harry, I'm trying to read here. You are making it difficult to concentrate. Hermione silently admonished as the blush on her face deepened. The book was now directly in front of her face so that she could hide her flush from Harry.

A small smile of amusement crept onto his face. It died immediately when he realised that Ron had mistaken the blush on her face as some maiden reaction to his appreciative stare and a wide victorious smile was plastered on his face. Harry's emerald eyes hardened with anger.

Harry, he doesn't know we are together. It will be unfair to him. Hermione reminded gently.

It made him felt foolish that he could save himself from all the anger if he had told them earlier. He had decided not to procrastinate any further.

"I have something to tell all of you before we get to Hogwarts." Harry announced suddenly as he looked at the two silent Weasleys. He immediately had their full attention. Ron was being his normal dense self as he gave Harry a blank stare. It was Ginny's reaction that had unnerved him slightly. The redheaded girl was staring back at him with an odd expression as if she had guessed what he was about to say. Harry tugged at his collar uneasily as he pondered which way to tell them. He didn't think it would be so difficult to say.

"What is it, mate?" Ron asked anxiously. He did not like to be kept in suspense.

Try something direct, love. Hermione advised.

Harry took a deep breath and went on, "Hermione and I are together."

Before Harry could get the Weasleys' response, the speeding train they were on had suddenly jolted into an emergency stop, sending the most of the passengers sprawling on the floor. Harry had managed to keep Hermione and him on the seat because he held on to the door tightly. The lights on the train had abruptly gone off, enshrouding the train in darkness. There was dead silence as everything came into a standstill.

Ron and Ginny had noisily scrambled back onto their seats. "Hush," Harry ordered as he slowly stood up from his seat. With his wand in his hand, he approached the window to check what was going on. The tension in the air made his muscles coil. Something was totally out of place. He saw a jerk from the opposite seat and he commanded softly, "Stay where you are." Harry peered out of the window into the darkness. He saw faint outline of figures approaching the train. He had a really bad feeling about what was about to happen.

There is a group approaching us. I can't see what they are and I don't know their numbers. We might be rushing into a more dangerous situation if we try to leave the train. Harry thought.

It's the only thing we can do until we have more information. Hermione concurred with his thoughts.

Let me scout the area. We can't hide out in here if they are dangerous. Almost all magical creatures and spells don't affect owls. Hedwig answered firmly.

Harry and Hermione did not like putting their familiar in danger but they agreed reluctantly. Hermione magically unlocked the cage as the snowy white owl flew out of the window.

Be safe. Harry thought.

You too. You tend to get into trouble easily. Hedwig retorted.

"I think it's better to stay put for now." Harry said gravely as he slowly felt his way back to his seat with the help of Hermione.

"You must be insane to think I'm going to listen to you. I'm getting out of here." Ron answered brusquely as he took Harry by surprise by shoving Harry away with great force as he walked out and let the door shut ominously behind him.

"No!" Harry hissed as he crashed onto the ground. Suddenly, he felt the unnatural chill running through him. He recognised the sign immediately. "Bloody hell!" Harry shouted in panic, as he hurriedly got on his feet, flung the door open to chase after his friend.

Ron was standing a few feet away from the door. Two hooded figures were advancing menacingly at him. Harry had correctly identified them as Dementors. The fate of his friend's soul was inevitable as he froze in fear a few inches away from the hooded figures.

Harry reacted in the way he usually did. He recklessly dashed towards Ron and knocked him out of harm's way as he felt the abnormal cold numbing his heart. Screwing his face up in concentration of a happy memory, he tried to cast his Patronus with his wand. Unfortunately, only a white mist appeared from his wand as the screaming in his head distracted him.

The screaming had grown almost deafening when one of the Dementors lifted their hood slowly with his pale, ghost-like hand as he towered over Harry. Harry could not roll away from harm's way as his entire body was paralysed by the cold. Consciousness of his surroundings had begun to fade slowly as he frantically tried to cast the spell. He felt himself descending through a thick fog as something dragged him desperately down. He heard the voice of someone roaring a spell. Using the last ounce of awareness, he temporarily broke the emotional and mind links by lifting his mental shields as the voice of a female screaming consumed him.

"Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!"

"Stand aside, you silly girl... stand aside, now..."

“Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead-“

“Not Harry! Please...have mercy...have mercy...”

A loud, unearthly, bone-chillingly shrill voice was laughing. The woman was still screaming and Harry knew no more.

“Harry, Harry!” a familiar, shrill voice pierced through Harry’s senses. His head was aching in pain as he recovered from the mental anguish. He never felt so tormented until he heard the exchange of words his mother had with Tom Riddle before she sacrificed her life for him. His tensed shoulders were protesting loudly in pain as he tried to shift a little. The cloud in his mind began to clear. Harry opened his eyes timidly and was nearly blinded by the overhead lights of the train. He could feel the floor was shaking from the speed the train was travelling.

“Harry!” Someone had flung her arms around his neck. Pain shot through his body at the impact and he winced lightly. Brown, bushy hair obscured his vision. He was in finally in his sanctuary. He took in her delicious vanilla scent as he relaxed. Enveloped in her warm embrace, his over-agitated emotions began to calm as he allowed their love permeate every fibre of his being, flushing the emotional residue of the terrifying memory, and replacing it with tranquillity. His shoulder was reduced to a throbbing pain.

Hermione lifted her face to look at him with her tearful, blood-shot eyes. “I thought I was too late. You were having such a bad fit.”

“I’m alright, love.” Harry answered comfortingly. He wanted to lift his arm to run his fingers through her brown hair but pain shot through his body from the movement and he winced. “I think I sprained my shoulder. Can you please help me?” Harry asked. Hermione immediately used her wand to cast a healing spell on his injured shoulder. The pain was gone, leaving him with pure fatigue. Harry hurriedly lowered his mental defences and Hermione and Hedwig’s feelings of relief immediately flooded into him. Harry could feel their concern at his exhaustion. It was the simmering anger under Hermione’s relief that caught his attention. Harry swallowed visibly as he looked at his wife awkwardly.

To his surprise, her chocolate-hued eyes merely flashed understanding as she glazed tenderly at him.

I'm not angry with you, dear. I know you did what you had to do to save that idiot. At that, her expression hardened. Hermione had mentally spat the word idiot before she continued. Professor Lupin was one step ahead of me. He had cast a Patronus to chase away the pair of Dementors hovering over you. While he was doing so, Hedwig had reported there was a large group of Dementors outside the train so I used the wind element to blow them away from the train because I didn't think Professor Lupin could take the huge group alone. Hermione answered as she gently helped him up and supported him into the compartment where Hedwig was waiting anxiously.

Harry could sense that Hermione was a bit baffled by several things and he didn't want to share with her while he was still feeling so weak. When Harry had sat down on the seat, Hedwig immediately leapt onto his leg and glared at him with her amber eyes.

I leave you for a moment and you nearly lost your soul because you wanted to save someone. Hedwig reprimanded angrily.

"I didn't have a choice." Harry answered aloud as he affectionately scratched Hedwig under her beak. He summoned an owl treat. "Here's a treat for your hard work." Harry said as he offered the owl treat. She had eyed it with great mistrust, but finally took the treat and ate it.

I am just hungry from the flight. Don't think that I have forgiven you. Hedwig said as she finished the treat.

"Hedwig, it isn't his fault this time. Harry told him to stay in the compartment but that idiot decided to shove him onto the ground and get in harm's way until Harry saved him." Hermione explained as she stroked the owl.

Harry could tell that she was weary from the expansion of her magic and the emotional roller coaster she had experienced, so he wrapped

his arms around her shoulder and pulled her closer to him so that she could use his chest as a pillow.

Harry cast a spell to unlock the door of the carrier and allowed Crookshanks to join them. It was then that Harry realised that there were only two trunks on the luggage rack. Ginny and Ron had taken their trunks with them.

Thank you, Harry. Both of you looked really dreadful. Why don't both of you sleep? We'll wake you up if someone comes. Crookshanks suggested as he lay on their legs. He was right as usual. Harry was still feeling a little worn out from the experience and needed a bit of rest.

Hermione let out a cute sleepy yawn as she snuggled closer to him and fell asleep. Harry tenderly brushed his lips on her head. Harry was expecting Hermione to scold him for his hasty actions. His heart had swelled up with adoration when she understood his reasons. Harry knew he had to be more careful in the future. With that silent promise, he fell asleep.

Professor Lupin smiled with amusement when he noiselessly entered the compartment to check on Harry. Harry was holding the brown haired girl close to him as they slept peacefully with a large ginger cat slept on their legs. A snowy white owl had gazed at him curiously with her large amber eyes as she perched on Harry's leg. The young couple looked so cute with their pets resting with them. Lupin knew that Harry's parents would give anything to see such a heart-warming sight. Harry began to stir and opened his eyes drowsily as he glanced at him.

"Harry, how are you feeling?" Professor Lupin asked as he sat down.

His emerald eyes had widened with surprise at the use of his name before he grinned and answered quietly, "I'm fine, Professor." Harry was careful not to wake his wife or her pet.

For a person who was nearly kissed by a Dementor less than an hour ago, Harry looked too relaxed. The professor noted that he had some colouring on his face - with a bit of food and rest, Harry would be fine.

"It was a brave but foolish thing for you to push your friend out of the way." Professor Lupin admonished gravely. Like father, like son, James would also do anything for his friends.

"I didn't have a choice. I couldn't let the Dementor suck out his soul." Harry replied as he looked at the Professor cautiously.

"How do you know about the Dementors? You live with Muggles." Professor Lupin asked with his eyebrows arched in surprise.

"I learned about them from books." Harry answered him simply as if it was the most natural thing to do. Elissa had covered many magical creatures in her classes and a Dementor was one of them. She had taught them the weaknesses of the creatures. Dementors could die if they were burned by elfish fire. Their duelling teacher would've admonished him if he knew that Harry had stupidly used his body to defend his friend against a Dementor, especially since Harry and Hermione were trained to cast Patronus very well.

The statement filled the Professor with mirth. He couldn't see the son of James being a bookworm.

Harry stared at the Professor with bewilderment. Professor Lupin looked really young when he laughed heartily.

"I have a question, Professor. Is it normal for someone to recall a distant memory when Dementors sap all the happiness? I heard my mother." Harry declared flatly.

The mirth in Professor Lupin's eyes died.

"You heard Lily?" Professor Lupin asked with strange voice as he raised his eyebrows in disbelief.

Harry was finally certain that Professor Lupin was exactly who Harry had thought he'd be. He was Remus Lupin, one of his father's best friends. The way he had used his mother's name with familiarity had given his identity away.

"Yes, I heard her final exchange of words with Voldemort before he killed her." Harry replied. His emerald eyes became clouded with emotions as he lowered his head. His mother had died protecting him because Tom Riddle wanted his blood. A fresh new wave of pain and guilt swept through him at the thought causing Hermione to stir from her nap.

Professor checked his watch. "I'm glad that your friend is waking up. We have five minutes before we reach the Hogsmeade Station. I'm going to check on the red-haired boy now."

"How is he?" Harry asked with deep concern. Harry did not understand why Ron had reacted that way and placed himself in danger.

"He fractured one of his arms and broke his wand when he skidded across the floor. He was mildly affected by the Dementors. You don't have to worry, he will be sent to the hospital wing as soon as we arrive." Professor Lupin answered as he watched the concern written on Harry's face. He was not too sure if that boy deserved Harry's attention, but he wordlessly left the compartment.

Hermione had sleepily opened her eyes. "I felt your guilt and pain. Did something happen?"

"No, love. Professor Lupin was here just now. I'll tell you all about it after we've changed." Harry smiled at her tenderly as he took out their robes from their trunks, handing a set to his wife.

"Professor Lupin is really Remus Lupin then?" Hermione asked as came to the realisation. Harry had deliberately left out Ron's injuries. "Do you want to tell him that you do know his identity?"

"I think I will leave it up to Professor Lupin to decide. If he has chosen not to introduce himself as my father's friend after meeting me, he must have a good reason for it. Regardless, I still really want to know if he knows anything about my parent's betrayal. According to my dad's journal, Professor Lupin was hiding at the time because of his furry problem so I think he will only have a second-hand account." Harry answered as he packed the cage into his trunk.

“A second-hand account can still give us the motive behind Sirius Black’s imprisonment.” Hermione pointed out as she packed her carrier into her trunk.

“We’ll just have to find a way to ask him when we get to school.” Harry said as he tapped on the trunks and they reduced in size. Harry then placed the trunks in his pocket. The train began to cut its speed as it moved towards the stop.

“I think we have more things to worry about at this point in time. We’re going to make our first appearance at Hogwarts as a couple.” Hermione declared nervously as she felt the train coming to a halt. Her stomach was clammy in anticipation of the inevitable. They were about to be tossed fiercely into the spotlight, something the introverted, book-loving girl did not like.

Harry could feel her jittery nerves and he smiled at her affectionately. He knew full well the effort Hermione had made to be with him and he never felt luckier having such a considerate spouse. His thoughts had made blood race to her cheeks. Taking both of her hands into his, he lifted them to his lips and gently kissed her knuckles as he assured her with his loving gaze and soothing tone. “No matter what happens, I’ll be there for you, forever and a day. We’ll get through this together. I’m proud that we belong to each other.” Harry beamed intensely as he held her hand and carried Crookshanks with another.

The train had finally come into a halt at Hogsmeade Station. There was a familiar scramble on the platform as waves of students exited the train like herds of wild beasts in the midst of their great African crossing. “Let’s get the show on the road.” Harry smiled comfortingly as he led his wife down the train to join the throes of students on the platform. The couple had the full attention of all the students with their linked hands. Harry ignored the stares and the whisperings as he led a quivering Hermione to an empty carriage. Harry gently helped her into it before climbing on himself. There was no sign of Ron or Ginny on the platform. He was certain that they must have headed to the castle first to have Ron’s injuries looked at.

"How do you feel, love? Was it that bad?" Harry asked as he looked tenderly at Hermione.

"I'm alright. It wasn't as bad as I thought." She added with a smile. All of a sudden, she frowned. "I realised I never saw Ron anywhere. Do you know what happened to that idiot?" Hermione questioned. She was absolutely furious at him for foolishly placing her mate in unnecessary danger, but he was still their friend.

"I think I may have pushed him aside too hard. He fractured one of the arms from the impact on the ground. Professor Lupin said that he was sending him straight up to the hospital wing after we reached the station. He also broke his wand from the impact." Harry answered guiltily as he lowered his head. Hermione gently tipped his head up so that she could look into his eyes.

His usual sparkling green eyes were dull with blame. Hermione had every intention of reprimanding him for his unnecessary guilt but she chose a softer approach.

"Don't be silly, love. What are one fractured arm and a broken wand compared to a missing soul? You saved him from a fate worse than death. Madam Pomfrey can set a broken arm right at once. He can always buy a new wand. Nothing can replace his soul if he was kissed." Hermione tried to soothe Harry as she gently stroked his cheeks. "You did all you can to save him from danger. You shouldn't feel bad about that. Besides, he didn't listen to your warning, shoved you aside, and got into the sticky mess first."

"You're right, dear." Harry answered tersely as he drew his hand through his hair.

"This isn't the only thing bothering you. I felt your pain and guilt in the train just now. " Hermione said as she quirked one of her eyebrows. "Did Professor Lupin say something?"

His wife was just too sharp to hide anything from her.

"I pushed Ron away from the approaching Dementors. I was too distracted by the screaming in the head to concentrate on casting a Patronus spell and I passed out. I heard my mum. She had exchanged words with Riddle before he murdered her. She was pleading him to spare my life. She was willing to use her life to exchange for mine." Harry added emotionally as tears began to well up in his eyes as he recounted the experience. Hermione had encircled her arms securely around him as he continued. "He laughed and killed her as she screamed. That bastard only wanted me. He killed her because she was protecting me." Harry replied with anguish as he placed his head on his knees and wrapped his hands around his head. Hermione could feel the rolling waves of pain surging through him.

"What else could your mother do but that? She loved you so much. Before you were even born, she bestowed all her love on you. You know that you were her life from all the journal entries she made when she realised she was pregnant. It's okay to weep for her." Hermione answered emotionally with tears shining in her eyes. She remembered the glowing and hopeful entries Lily had written about Harry even though they were living through dark times. "However, you do her memory no honour if you think you are the cause of her death." Hermione added lovingly as she looked at Harry.

Quiet tears were running down his cheeks when he raised his face to look at his wife. His heart was overwhelmed with love when he saw the tracks of glistening tears on her porcelain cheeks. His angel was crying with him. The overly emotional Harry took her into his arms and they wept together for his parents.

Harry did not know long how he held his wife in his arms and cried for his parents but he felt he could finally come to terms with his parents' death. Harry knew that he would always grieve for the loss of his parents but Hermione would always be here to soothe his aching soul.

Harry gently wiped the tears off his wife's beautiful face as he smiled at her with affection and gratitude. "Thank you." He whispered tenderly as he placed his forehead against hers. He closed his eyes as a sense of serenity washed over him.

“You’re welcome.” She whispered softly.

Harry helped his wife from down the carriage when they had finally reached Hogwarts. Crookshanks had dashed happily into the darkness with Hedwig soaring above then as they climbed down the steps of the carriage.

They had made sure they were presentable to meet the rest of the school before alighting from the carriage. Harry gazed fondly at the building. It was the first place he felt at rest. Harry glanced at his wife as he entwined their hands together. A small and nervous smile was on her lips but she was exuding a quiet confidence. Harry beamed brightly as he led her up the stone stairs of Hogwarts, through the great oak doors, and into the grand entrance hall. The expansive foyer was lit with flaming torches and it housed a majestic marble stairs that led to the higher levels.

“Potter! Granger! I want to see you both.” A voice called.

Harry and Hermione spun around in surprise and saw Professor McGonagall, head of Gryffindor, calling over a sea of students. She was looking as stern as ever. Her hair was still pulled up in a tight bun and her sharp eyes were framed with square spectacles.

Harry easily cut through the crowd with Hermione following closely behind him. They had managed to reach the severe lady. A glint of surprise was evident in her eyes as she took in the sight of the two students. It unravelled the mystery of how Potter broke Weasley’s arm when he pushed him away. Harry had become bigger in size with well-defined lean muscles. “Follow me to my office.” She answered in her usual uncompromising tone.

They wordlessly followed their Professor to her office. It was a small room decorated in traditional Gryffindor red and gold. Professor McGonagall gestured for them to sit down as she sat behind her desk. Harry drew the chair out for his wife and pushed it in for her after she had sat down. Hermione had shot an appreciative smile at him as Harry sat on the chair beside Hermione. A brief look of approval crossed McGonagall’s face before she focused on the young couple through her square glasses and began. “There are two issues I need

to talk to you about. First, Professor Lupin has informed us about what took place on the train. Mr. Weasley is now in the hospital wing with Miss Weasley. I believe that he is doing fine. How are you feeling, Potter and Granger?" She asked, with concern lacing her stern voice.

Harry and Hermione exchanged puzzled looks. "We are alright, Professor."

Professor McGonagall looked quizzically at them. "Potter, you were nearly kissed by the Dementors on the train. Granger, you should've been affected by the Dementors since your mind is interlinked with his." She explained as a frown creased her brows.

"We really are fine." Hermione added quickly. Before Professor McGonagall could say anything, there was a knock on the door and the school's healer, Madam Pomfrey, strode into the room with a case.

"Is he the one that Professor Lupin was talking about? It's you again." Madam Pomfrey asked as she bent down and stared at him. "He looks fine to me."

"I had the chance to rest." Harry answered with an assuring smile.

"They are also the special pair that I mentioned to you recently. Do you need to check them?" Professor McGonagall asked as she looked at the matron meaningfully. "I heard from Professor Dumbledore that you wanted to keep the recent changes a secret but Madam Pomfrey was informed because she needs to ensure that both of you are fine. When your souls bonded, so did your magical cores. She needs to check if your cores are functioning well enough for lessons. We don't know how long does it take to establish the bond, but it is unwise to use magic until the bond stabilises." Professor McGonagall explained.

Madam Pomfrey opened the case and took out a rod. She scanned Harry and checked the readings. Her eyes widened in shock when she saw the level of magic. It was far too high to be the reading for the joining of two magical cores.

Harry arched his eyebrows questioningly, "Yes?" He asked. He knew that their bond was stabilised since Edmund had already proclaimed it was. She proceeded on to examine Hermione. It had produced the same analysis.

"They have completely bonded. Their bodies are used to the new level of magic. They are in relatively good health. Some food and a good night sleep will do them wonders. If there is nothing else, I need to check on my patient." Madam Pomfrey added with a warm smile.

"Thank you. How is Mr. Weasley?" Professor McGonagall asked.

"He was pale from the contact with Dementors and he fractured his right arm. I have already healed the arm but I left him in the hospital wing to get some rest. He will be joining the feast later." Madam Pomfrey answered.

"Thank you. I'll see you at the feast later." Professor McGonagall said as the matron left her office.

When the sound of the door closing was heard, Professor McGonagall went to the next topic. "I understand your need to keep your bonding a secret, but we have a problem on our hands. Both of you need to move to the marriage quarters to ensure that you maintain regular physical contact. However, your dormitory mates would naturally suspect something if both of you move out of your dormitory together." Professor McGonagall said.

Hermione was biting her lips as she contemplated the issue. Suddenly, an idea came to her head and she suggested. "Let's try this. Harry has become Lord Potter since we are married. He can always claim that he was emancipated early because the Potter's affairs are in need of attention. It is acceptable that Harry, Head of the Ancient and Noble House of Potter, formally request for private quarters befitting of his rank. There was another young Lord of a Noble House who was granted a suite of his own in the past because of the immense paper work he needed to get done for his properties. That would explain his need not to stay in the dormitory." Hermione finished as she looked at the Professor expectantly.

“It does help to explain his need of his own quarters but does not explain your need as well.” Professor McGonagall said. “I have an idea. We shall just use the excuse that Hermione will be heavily involved in a confidential project with me, and the work she will be doing requires private quarters. I’ve always been fascinated by soul bonds. Both of you are the only pair of true soul mates I have known, so don’t be surprised to see me taking up some of your free time to learn more about it. The quarters given would be the other suite attached to Harry’s suite. It is also connected to the Gryffindor Common Room. It is rather similar to the Head boy and girl’s suites - you will notice the differences soon enough. Are there any objections?” Professor McGonagall asked as she looked at the two teenagers. Both shook their heads. “If there’s nothing else, let’s head down to the feast. “

“Thank you, Professor McGonagall for your time.” Harry answered with a polite smile as he stood up to pull the chair for Hermione. Harry held her Hermione’s hand as they followed Professor McGonagall down to the Great Hall.

It was a sea of pointed black hats in the Great Hall. The staff table stood prominently on a platform in the front, as four long tables, representing the each of the four houses of Hogwarts: Gryffindor, Slytherin, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw, lay perpendicular to it. All the long house tables were lined with students in standard black Hogwarts robes. Their faces were glowing from the light of thousands of candles floating over the tables.

The sorting ceremony of the first years was finished by the time they had arrived into the Great Hall. Professor McGonagall had walked towards her empty seat at the staff table when they had arrived leaving the couple alone. They had headed the opposite direction, moving through the back of the hall quietly but hurriedly walking to the empty seats at the head of the Gryffindor table. Despite their attempt at a discreet entrance, Harry and Hermione were still cast into the spotlight. Every student had turned to watch the couple as they walked to their seats. They could hear excited whispers about them as they hurriedly walked past with interlinked hands.

"I guess we made an entrance. I hope that it will die down eventually". Harry whispered as he pulled her closer to him and beamed a dazzling white smile at her.

Hermione's face turned crimson red from that stunning smile as they settled into their seats. The buzzing in the hall had grown louder at sight of the expressions of the couple. Harry was still wearing the same wide charming smile as they settled into their seats. Despite Hermione's silent protest, Harry had left a seat for Ron, so that he could join them when he came down from the hospital wing.

The Headmaster cleared his voice to get the attention of the school as he rose to give his usual welcome speech. He smiled at all the students before he beginning his speech in his deep, reassuring voice.

"Welcome! Welcome to another year in Hogwarts. I have an important announcement to make before we start our feast. The school is presently playing host to some Dementors from Azkaban. Some of you might have met them on the train." He announced as he glanced at the Gryffindor table. "They are here on Ministry business and will be stationed at every entrance to the grounds. While they are here, I must emphasize to all of you not leave the school without permission. Dementors are able to see through all disguises. It's not the nature of Dementors to understand excuses, therefore I warn you not to give them reason to hurt you. The consequences will be dire." Dumbledore paused to give the students a moment to digest his warning.

"Next, I would like all of you to join me in welcoming two new teachers to our staff. First, I present to you, Professor Remus Lupin. He will be teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts." There was a polite applause as the young man stood up. Harry shot a sweeping glance across the staff table and was not surprised to see a look of pure loathing contorting the potion master's face. It was his father's best friend after all. "Next, I am delighted to announce that Rubeus Hagrid will be taking over the post of teaching Care of Magical Creatures."

Harry and Hermione stared at each other dumbfounded expression plastered on their faces. He should've guessed that Hagrid was taking over the post when Hermione bought the same book that Hagrid had given him for his birthday. A loud round of applause had erupted in the Great Hall, notably from Gryffindor table. Hagrid turned scarlet as he sat in his seat. Harry and Hermione knew that he was very pleased with the appointment.

"Let the feast begin!" Headmaster Dumbledore announced loudly before sitting down regally.

The glowing plates and goblets in front of them were filled up with delicious food and drinks after the announcement was made. Harry and Hermione heartily helped themselves to the food in front of them. The journey on the train had made them both famished. Hermione watched with approval glowing in her brown eyes as Harry partook of the food with impeccable manners. It was something Harry would never have done if he was this hungry in the past.

Decorum was essential in establishing an individual as a respectable person - despite the lack of attention the curriculum at Hogwarts had paid to it and in addition to having an undisputed high level of morality. Elissa had managed to polish off the Harry's rough edges, changing him to a fine gentleman.

The students were well into the feast when Ron and Ginny made their appearance. The red head looked fine. He stopped at the end and scanned the table while Ginny joined her second year friends. His eyes fell on the vacant seat besides Harry, the only seat left at the table, so he walked over to join them. Harry and Hermione had finished their meal some time ago and were enjoying an idle conversation with each other. Harry was leaning on his arm as his body turned to face Hermione. When Ron approached them, he realised that Hermione's fair cheeks were tinted red with bashfulness. A sweet, blissful smile was plastered on her lips as she looked at Harry with affection and spoke quietly.

Ron saw red. His assumption that Hermione had a crush on him and that Harry had snatched her from him, opened the floodgates of his emotions and released torrents of rage. Harry now had everything.

He had the girl, the fame, and the money. Why was Harry so selfish that he could not at least leave Hermione for him? Harry had so many girls panting after him. Ron even lived with one, Ginny. His rather closed-up mind had even come to a conclusion that he did not owe a life debt to Harry.

Harry owed him for being used to satisfy his hero complex.

Harry owed him for making his life miserable.

Ron 's mind was fixed on turning the tables on the Boy-Who-Lived as he faced the back of the raven-haired boy.

Everything happened very fast. Hermione was talking to Harry when she causally glanced at the person standing behind oblivious Harry. It was Ron. A frown of confusion marred her face when she saw that his face was as red as his hair with fury. Harry had stood up and spun around to check the source of her confusion when he saw Ron. A fleeting smile of relief crossed Harry's face as he tried to clap on his friend's back in a welcoming manner. Ron had angrily shoved him.

A comical look of shock was on Harry's face as he gaped at his friend.

"Stop pretending, Potter. You pushed me out of the way because you wanted to be seen as the good guy, even after snatching your best friend's girl." There was a loud audible gasp but Ron continued to rage," You even took the opportunity to have your revenge by fracturing my arm and breaking my new wand. Your hero complex disgusts me. I'm tired of you making my life miserable. I'm always the side kick to the great Harry Potter." Ron hissed loudly, with ugly anger contorting his face. His words had caught the attention of all the occupants in the hall.

A flicker of pain appeared momentarily across Harry's face before it subsided behind the cool mask. Hermione was standing beside Harry and was gently holding Harry's arm.

"Oh?" Harry asked with natural coolness that chilled the hearts of those who could hear the conversation. Harry was well aware of the audience and had no desire to make a scene. There was no hint of

warmth in his dull jade orbs as he stared at the irate redhead. "I'm sorry that my company abhorred you. You do have the choice to leave. Another thing, be absolutely clear that Hermione is my girl. We decided to date at the start of the holidays." Harry concluded as he sat down, blatantly ignoring the redhead as his face turned livid.

Hermione shot a dirty glare at Ron. Even in his rage, Harry was gracious enough not to embarrass Ron with the truth in the public. She angrily settled down beside Harry. There were the sounds of shrilly screams of pain, fluttering of wings, and hissing when they had turned their backs on him.

Before Ron could say or do anything else, he started being attacked by Hedwig and Crookshanks. Crookshanks was furiously trying to get at him with his long extended claws. Ron had covered his face with his arms and Hedwig was trying scratching them with her sharp talons.

Take that you, idiot. Hedwig growled.

Stupid two-legged. Crookshanks hissed.

It was mayhem as the other Weasleys dashed forward, trying to save Ron from the menacing animals. It was amusing to see that two fifth years, a head boy, and a second year were unable to stop the furious attacks using their physical strength because they were unable to catch the dexterous creatures. Hedwig could swiftly fly out of their reach and maintain her constant attack on Ron. Crookshanks had agilely dodged the grabbing hands by climbing on Ron with his claws as he squealed in pain. Their faces were bright red from the exertion and everyone was laughing at the sight.

Harry and Hermione had hurriedly leapt to their pets' defence when they spotted Percy in the midst of casting a spell on them.

"Crookshanks and Hedwig. That is enough." Hermione said in a harsh tone.

"Expelliarmus! Accio wand!" Harry shot two spells at Percy, disarming him and taking his wand. His wand landed neatly on his outstretched

palm as he glowered at the incensed and helpless Percy. The laughter in the hall had died instantly. A third year had beaten a seventh year easily.

Hedwig immediately flew away from Ron and landed on Harry's shoulder as Crookshanks leapt gracefully away from Ron and arrogantly walked to Hermione. She immediately picked him up as she glared at Percy. Crookshanks had a haughtily look on his face as he looked at Percy with disdain.

"That is enough, Mr Potter, return the wand to Mr. Weasley. Someone take the other Mr. Weasley to the hospital wing. Ten points from Gryffindor for using spells in the Great Hall." Dumbledore said with his deep voice.

Fred and George had taken the sobbing Ron out of the Great hall. His arms were covered with talon scratches. Crookshanks' sharp claws tore his robes.

"I believe it is my right to defend my familiar if someone attempts to hurt them with a spell, headmaster." Harry said as he looked at the Headmaster. "Hedwig is my familiar and Percy was going to hurt her."

His beautiful white owl had hooted in approval, as the buzzing in the hall grew louder at the proclamation. "As for what has happened just now, I will inform them not to repeat the performance. They are not humans and did not have restraint when Weasley had said something too offensive for them to take lying flat."

"Very well, Mr Potter. I will not take points from the House for this. Make sure that this does not happen again. I wish to speak to you and Miss Granger later in my office after the feast." Dumbledore added firmly.

Harry was stroking his beautiful snowy white avenger with affection. "I know you mean well. I don't want a repeat performance because it will give them a reason to banish you out of the castle." Harry admonished with a firm tone as he stared at both of the pets. The pets were silent with shame. It was until they spotted the slight

amused lift of the corners of his lips, did they realise that Harry had enjoyed what they had done.

“Thank you.” Hermione smiled as she stroked her cat. “I was amused when no one could catch you and had to resort to using magic.”

It was apparent that they were not the only ones who were amused by the spontaneous dinner show. Neville Longbottom, a rather small, chubby, and timid boy of the same year approached them.

“Hi, Harry and Hermione. They really packed a punch, Harry. Ron crossed the line with his remarks. Everyone in Gryffindor had been guessing when the both of you would get together since first year because both of you were always awfully close. I’m glad that the you two are together.” Neville said.

“Hi Neville. Thank you very much.” Hermione answered with a warm smile as she looked at the timid boy. “How was your holiday?” Harry could feel Hedwig’s pleasure from Neville’s words.

“Oh, it was fine.” Neville replied in a squeaky voice as he looked shyly at Hermione. “I don’t mean to offend you, Harry but Hermione, you look really beautiful.” Neville said as he lowered his head. “Harry looks amazing, too. What’ve both of you been doing during the holidays?” Neville posed inquisitively.

Harry’s lips had curled upwards in amusement. “We’ve been exercising and eating well. Hermione’s parents were very gracious to me when they took me in over the holidays.”

“Well, that explains your physique.” Neville added thoughtfully. “What happened on the train? There was a blackout. Professor Lupin started ushering us back to our compartments as soon as I finally felt my way out.” Neville had stiffened momentarily as Crookshanks leapt onto his lap since he now knew what the cat could do when he was enraged. Neville relaxed considerably when Crookshanks started purring. The three of them talked about their holidays until Dumbledore rose up to announce it was time to head to bed.

Harry and Hermione bid Neville a good night as they quietly headed upstairs with Professor Dumbledore to his office.

The headmaster peered at the young couple sitting in front of him through his half moon spectacles. "Harry, you constantly surprise me. Professor Lupin just told me all about the events on the train. It was very admirable of you not to lose your temper with Mr. Weasley."

Harry merely raised his eyebrows. "I don't believe in airing dirty linen in public."

"Commendable all the same." The aged wizard smiled. "I need to speak to both of you regarding your aptitude to sit for O. this year. Both of you need not attend lessons this week so that you can prepare and take the exams. This is your exam schedule." Dumbledore added as he handed them a parchment with all the test dates, time, and venues listed. "The professors were informed to discreetly test you, with the exception of Professor Snape since I will be testing you on Potions. Professor McGonagall has spoken to me about the reasons the both of you will be using to stay in the marriage quarters. I suggest that you obtain a personal house elf to help you maintain your affairs and keep up appearances."

"We'll do that." Harry answered. "Was there anything else, Professor?"

"No, I think we've covered everything. This parchment will help you get to your quarters. Your trunks have already been moved there. I wish both of you a good night." Dumbledore smiled warmly as he handed them the other parchment. It had directions and instructions on resetting the password.

Both of Harry and Hermione returned Dumbledore's warm smile.

"Good night, Professor." Hermione answered as Harry drew the chair out for her. The young couple linked hands and left the office.

Professor Dumbledore had known that soul bond would enable the soul mates to instinctively learn Occlumency as a measure to maintain some form of privacy between them, but he didn't realize

that they could master the art because of it. He was unable to pick up any stray thoughts from the young couple.

This puzzled him immensely. Surely, a soul bond releases more power rather than helping one have better control of their magical core? Harry had displayed that he had the might to take a seventh year easily. How did he grow so fast? However, the one that Dumbledore was more concerned about was Harry's mate, Hermione. If Harry had progressed steadily to such a level, then his soul mate would probably be at the same level. Yet, she was shrewd enough to hide her talents far better than Harry was, making her more of a force to be reckoned with than her husband. He shuddered at the thought of them turning dark. It could be far worse than Voldemort. No, he had to make sure that they remained on the side of the light.

A/N: Hi everyone. Thank you,frustr8dwriter for the work well done. I hope you enjoy the chapter. For all who reviewed my story and I did not reply, thank you for your reviews. Please comment. Have a nice week ahead.

Chapter 8

A new addition

Beta read by frustr8dwriter

"According to the instructions," The black-haired boy muttered, peering closely at the parchment as he walked to the wall separating the two large staircases leading to the male and female Gryffindor dormitories. "The initial entrance should be here." A majestic statue of a lion stood in front of the wall. Harry and Hermione had never given this sculpture much thought since it looked like a proper decoration for the common room of Gryffindor.

"What's the next step?" Hermione asked inquisitively as she ran her long slender fingers along the top of the cold, granite mane of the statue.

"We'll need to set a password." Harry answered as he lifted his head from the parchment and quietly glanced at the brown-haired witch. He ejected the wand from his holster into his palm as he pondered. Harry finally decided on the password when a captivating image of Hermione dancing gracefully in his arms had flashed in his mind. He tapped on the grey nose of the lion twice as he spoke "waltzing angel." The stone lion moved aside, revealing a gloomy, narrow area with a winding granite staircase. Hermione's cheeks were slightly red when Harry glanced at her. "I guess you won't have any problems remembering the password?" Harry asked with an amused glint in his eyes as he grinned rakishly.

"Let me set the password the next time." Hermione answered as she walked into the room. "I'll see if you like sexy green-eyed seeker." Harry chuckled lightly as he followed her into the room. The moment both of them had entered the room, the stone lion had moved silently back, closing the entrance as the torches in the room lit up.

Harry and Hermione silently climbed up the stairs and found themselves in a common area. The roaring fire in the fireplace illuminated the room. There were several large comfortable armchairs by the fireplace on the opposite end of the room and a small round

dining table, surrounded by four chairs was placed near the entrance of the room. There were even accommodations for their pets: a large stand stood near the window for owls to perch on and a basket near the fireplace for Crookshanks to curl up in.

Hedwig, we have moved into our own quarters. Where are you? Does Crookshanks know how to get in? Harry thought as he suddenly remembered Crookshanks was unfamiliar with Hogwarts.

I'll be carrying him into the quarters later. He seriously needs to lose a bit of weight. We're at the Owlery at the moment. I carried him in to have some fun. Hedwig added gleefully.

Why did you take him to the Owlery? What did Crookshanks do? Harry asked curiously. He was sure it wasn't anything good from the slightly impish hint of Hedwig's thoughts.

He did what all cats like to do. He chased birds, more specifically irritating, assuming, pompous, chauvinistic male owls. They always seem to think I'm a trophy that they can win after beating every other male owl in the place. The Owlery is a huge mess with their beautiful feathers of different colour scattering every way. By the way, fancy having one of two pillows made of owl feathers? Freshness and softness guaranteed. Hedwig returned.

An image of Crookshanks plucking feathers from owl with his mouth the same way someone plucked feathers from a chicken came into his mind, and he shuddered at how cruel Hedwig could be.

You really have a wild imagination, Harry. I can assure you that I am not that cruel. He is just chasing them around the Owlery in his attempt to swipe them with his paws. You can't imagine how much feathers can fall off because of a bit of stress. Hedwig explained.

Why didn't they fly out of the room? I thought owls loved their feathers?

The female owls had wisely left as soon as I came in with Crookshanks. I think it's because those males thought I'd become their mate if they could impress me with their courage by staying in

the Owlery with a fierce cat prowling around. Of course, I said nothing like that. She added haughtily. All I said was that most female owls would want a mate who was fearless like that. Hedwig added in a nonchalant tone.

Harry burst out in laughter. It was dangerous to get on the wrong side of Hedwig. Make sure Crookshanks is unharmed or else Hermione is going to have a good talk with you. He thought in a firm tone.

He'll be fine. One of the conditions was not to harm the cat. Hedwig added in a casual tone.

I can't believe the owls were stupid enough to do that. Harry commented.

Not all owls are gifted with intelligence, Harry. You're just one of the blessed wizards who have one as a pet. Hedwig thought rationally. Harry had rolled his eyes at her arrogance. The offer still stands, Harry. Do you need a new pillow?

Harry turned around to ask Hermione about it and realised that she had spaced out. Her brown orbs were glassy and her eyebrows were knitted together in deep thought as she stared at the fireplace. "Hermione?" Harry spoke as he waved his hands in front of her face. She was jolted back into reality by his actions.

"Yes?" Hermione asked as she tucked her wavy brown hair behind her ear.

"I was wondering if you would fancy a pillow made from owl feathers. Hedwig is really enthusiastic about it." Harry grinned warmly. He peered at her closely when he realised that she lack the familiar glint in her beautiful chocolate eyes.

"I'll be fine with anything, love." Hermione answered. She was looking at him intently with a weird expression on her face.

Hermione gave the green light. But I'll need to clean the feathers before we really make them to a pillow. Harry instructed.

The answer seemed to delight Hedwig greatly. I'll take the feathers to the house elf. They'll know what to do with them. We'll see you later. It's time both of you get into bed. Good night.

Harry arched his eyebrow when he noticed the weird expression on his wife's face. "Is something wrong?" He asked worriedly as he took a closer look at his wife. Hermione shook her head and turned away from him. His emerald orbs widened in surprise but he shrugged it off and blamed it on the long day they had. "Dear, it's very late. Let's check out the rest of our quarters tomorrow morning." Harry smiled warmly as he wrapped his arms around her shoulder and led his quiet wife into their bedroom.

The bedroom was decorated in equal splendour of traditional Gryffindor colours. A large comfortable bed was placed right in the middle of the large room. There was a huge built-in closet that took up an entire wall. A dresser stood near the entrance of the room. There was a large oak study table beside the oak dresser. Harry and Hermione would have been in awe of the grandeur of the room if they were not used to Edmund's taste.

There was an adjoining bathroom connected to the bedroom. It was decorated in the same fashion and it was sparkingly clean. The white basin and toilet bowl were of a gleaming white. There was no doubt that the house elves had taken great effort in making the quarters presentable by refurnishing the entire place. The young couple prepared for bed silently.

After he'd brushed his teeth, Harry had his back turned to his wife as he stripped down to his boxers - his usual bedtime outfit. Hermione had already climbed onto their new bed in her nightgown. He could feel the emotions surging through his wife as she openly admired his body. There was a mild tone of lust and possessiveness under her enjoyment.

Harry's breathing hitched.

There was a slight rustling of sheets and Harry could feel her arms circling his waist from behind as she laid her cheeks on his back. Her hands were slowly snaking up his toned abdomen to his well-defined

pectorals. His muscles quivered instinctively at her caress as his breathing quickened.

Harry grabbed both of her hands and wrapped them around his neck as he turned to face his wife with a questioning look on his face. It was simply not Hermione to be so forthcoming with her attentions. Hermione was kneeling on their large bed as she searched his face intensely. The sight of Harry mildly aroused made Hermione smiled with her lips seductively parted, further driving his hormones wild.

"Dear," Harry gulped clearly as he drew a hand through his hair nervously, "W-what are you doing?" Harry stammered. Desire was surged through him, heating his blood, sending it singing through his veins, forcing him to pull her closer to him. Harry tried to resist the action with all his will.

His body had tensed up immediately when Hermione leaned closer to him, moulding her body against his as she led him onto their bed. "I am trying to seduce you, love." She whispered huskily into his ear before she lifted her face to look at his reaction.

His emerald eyes widened dramatically as he looked into those brown eyes that were darkened with desire. With the open invitation, Harry found his control over his desires slipping by the second. He needed the bathroom urgently! Harry urgently tried to remove the arms around his neck and make a dash for the bathroom. In the House, Harry always got away from her and solved his 'problem' in their bathroom.

However, Hermione had refused to let him go and had tightened her arms around him. It was evident from the determined set of Hermione's jaw that he was not going to solve his problem that way this night. "Harry, I don't need you to be a gentleman tonight. I need you to be my lover." Hermione said with pleading eyes. Harry had always rejected her advances but the desperation in her tone shattered his will. His lips swooped down to capture her slightly parted lips in a demanding, searing kiss as he cupped her face with his calloused hands. His mouth opened over hers, slanting back and forth in a fierce, wildly arousing caress that send heat coursing through Hermione. He could feel her chest rising and falling rapidly

against his hard chest as his heart raced.

“Hermione,” He breathed in a ragged whisper, sliding his lips down her pale neck, and sending shivers of delight up her spine as she gasped and tangled her hand in his black hair. He was lost in the haze of nameless yearning. He pressed his lips on hers again, moving his lips passionately against hers as he lowered her to their bed. His tongue slid ardently back and forth, sending rolling waves of lust to flow through her body, urging her lips to part for his probing tongue.

The moment Hermione submitted herself to the sensual pressure by parting her lips, his tongue slid between them, plunging into the soft recesses of her mouth. Jolts after jolts of wild sensation rocketed through Hermione as his tongue explored her mouth, until, in a fever of dazed desire; she touched her tongue timidly to his.

Harry’s response was immediate. He groaned and pushed himself closer to Hermione, crushing her breasts against his chest, his tongue delved deeply into her mouth, and then retreating to plunge again and again in a wildly exciting rhythm. Harry shuddered at the contact when their tongues touched and caressed. It drove both of them over the edge with the overload of passion in their blood. Harry’s hands had begun to stroke her body on its own accord, causing her to shiver with pleasure from all the sensations he was evoking. Neither of them could think anymore as blood rushed away from their heads.

“Harry.” She muttered breathlessly when he tore his mouth away from her lips and focused on spreading tender kisses on her eyelids, her adorable nose, and along her jaw line. Harry then alternated between brushing his lips and grazing her neck passionately. Hermione had moaned his name and writhed under him in sheer pleasure.

Harry took her lips once again in a drugging kiss that made her knees weak before lifting his face to admire her beauty. Her masses of wavy brown hair had fanned across the pillow as she stared back him with lust filled eyes, pink cheeks, and swollen lips, panting heavily.

Hermione seemed to have some other plans. She immediately flipped him over so that she was now straddling his waist as she looked at him. The glorious mass of brown hair was cascading over them. "Harry love, you are so gorgeous." Hermione said ardently, as she teasingly traced her finger along his defined jaw. Her fingers trailed slowly across his lips as Harry shuddered at the sensations she was evoking in him. Hermione replaced her fingers with her lips.

You are mine. She thought passionately as she kissed him.

Her kisses seared his flesh like glowing brand, her mouth moving from his lips to his neck and chest, causing Harry to clutch the bed sheets tightly in restraint as he groaned her name. Hermione put her hands against his chest, slowly spreading her fingers, and was amazed when her simple action made his breath catch. Experimentally, she slid her hands lower, and the taut muscles of his stomach clenched reflexively.

Her fingers curled around the waistband of his boxers but before she could yank it down, Harry had grabbed her hands and pulled her face to his as he pinned her on her back. "Wait." Harry said his voice hoarse from passion as he kneeled over her. He slipped his hands up her exposed smooth thighs slowly, caressing and touching as his hands moved upwards. Her nightgown began riding up as he explored more of her body, exposing more of her. He slipped his hand underneath her nightgown and lifted it over her head and discarded it to the side as he took in the sight of his wife.

"Sweet Merlin." Harry groaned. His emerald eyes follow down from her defined collarbone to her breasts and down her flat toned abdomen. This magnificent girl lying on the bed with him was all his and his heart swelled with pleasure.

I am yours, love.

Like a hungry man presented with a great feast, Harry leaned down to taste her sweet skin and explore her body thoroughly.

Hermione lay on his chest as Harry gathered her close to him with a hand. Both of them were tired from exploring each other's body. "We

should have tried this earlier.” Harry smiled tiredly as he tenderly pressed a kiss on her forehead. He dimmed the lights with a flick of his hand.

Hermione snuggled up closer to him. “Well, it couldn’t be helped since you insisted on being a gentleman.” Hermione teased as she laid her flushed cheek on his toned bare chest.

“Well, you know one thing can lead to another.” He returned as he scratched his head with his free hand. “I know we’ve been together a long time, but I didn’t think I’d have the will to hold back. Love, I promised Dad that we’d wait until at least next year and you are only turning 14. What was with the sudden need for physical contact anyway?” Harry asked curiously. Hermione was passive when it came to love.

“I-I nearly lost you today. I just needed a re-affirmation.” Hermione stammered as she buried her face on his chest.

“Hermione, you know better than to lie to me. We don’t keep secrets from each other.” Harry chuckled as he tipped her head up to face him. Mirth was evident in his glowing emerald eyes as glazed at her.

“Ididntlikethewaythegirlswerelookingatyou.” She mumbled as she hastily averted her gaze and her cheeks turned crimson red.

It took a while for Harry to understand what she was saying and he burst out laughing. “Hermione love, the girls always look at me because I am the Boy-who-lived.”

Her face reddened even more. “It is not that, Harry. They were staring at you and drooling over you like you were some tasty piece of meat. They didn’t even bother to hide their attraction to you.” She answered in a huff. Harry playfully nuzzled his wife’s neck.

“I’m glad you finally understand how I feel.” He smiled affectionately as he wrapped his arm around her bare body and buried his face into her brown hair. The comforting familiar vanilla scent was luring him to sleep. “You don’t have to worry about them. I’m all yours to keep.” He

gave a tired yawn. "Goodnight, angel." Harry said as he kissed her head lovingly.

"I belong to you, too, Harry. Good night, dear." Hermione answered as she pecked his lips before snuggling back to his chest. She was lured into a deep slumber by his hypnotic steady heartbeat.

It was still dark and chilly when Harry and Hermione had headed out to the school grounds for their routine morning jog, using Harry's invisibility robe and a secret passageway his father had found during his second year. "It was a good idea to get tracksuits. I never thought that it would be this cold in the morning. It's best we keep our guard up since the Dementors might wander into the grounds at any time." Harry said as they jogged towards the lake. Even enshrouded in darkness, the lake was still a sight to behold with the majestic Hogwarts Castle as its backdrop.

"Are you terrified of the Dementors after yesterday's experience?" Hermione asked with deep concern as she peered closely at the boy jogging next to her.

"Not really, but the incident highlighted a very important point. Edmund has been training us in terms of skills and knowledge but clearly I have to be less hasty in the future. I endangered our souls, yesterday. Moreover, it is always better to be vigilant. I'm sure the Dementors would be more tempted to get onto the school grounds because of the students' excitement." Harry answered thoughtfully. "Dobby will be joining us as our house elf later in the morning."

They had jogged halfway around the picturesque lake when they felt the unnatural chilliness that Harry remembered clearly. Across the lake, a trio of Dementors were approaching a student. A feminine scream of fear pierced through the stillness of the early morning when the girl saw the approaching vile creatures.

"Bloody hell." Harry said. Concentrating on the memory of the previous night, he cast the Patronus spell as Hermione created a shield of wind to protect the student. The white corporal stag charged straight at the Dementors, chasing them away as Harry and Hermione rushed over to check on the student.

The girl had curled up in a corner of the wall, shivering as they approached. To their surprise, she was only garbed in her white school blouse and skirt and was not wearing a jacket or a school robe despite the morning chill. "Are you alright? What is your name?" Harry asked kindly as he lowered himself to her height and checked on her. Harry gave a sigh of relief when he realised that she was unharmed.

It was a close shave. Harry and Hermione exchanged concern looks with each other. She was a rather petite girl with long straight blonde hair. When she had lifted her pale face to look at them with her large round blue eyes, Harry could see the unshed tears clinging onto her eyes. She was visibly shaken. Despite of that, she tried to put on a tough front. "I-I am a-alright. M-my n-name is L-Luna." She spoke as her teeth chattered with cold. Harry took off his jacket and wrapped it around her as Hermione cast a warming spell on her. Hermione sat close to her and started to rub her chilly hands with her warm ones. The trembling subsided after a while.

It's Luna Lovegood from Ravenclaw. She is in her second year. I recognised her because she always seemed so alone. They have a nickname for her and its 'Loony Lovegood.'

"We can't stay here for long because there may be other Dementors prowling around. Let's head back into the castle. We'll have to go to the Gryffindor common room to avoid being caught by Filch. Can you walk?" Hermione asked with concern lacing her tone.

Luna shook her head.

"I'll carry her." Harry answered as he placed one of his hands under the crook of her knee, another beneath her back, and easily lifted her up. "We're going to the Gryffindor common room. Hold on to me." Harry said as he smiled at the petite girl. She was frightened by the sudden gesture and was glancing unsurely at Hermione. She smiled at her with assurance as they rushed into the caste.

They used the invisibility cloak to get back into the common room. Harry gently laid her on the large couch near the roaring fire as he

conjured drinks for them to drink. Hermione sat quietly next to her as she had wrapped a friendly arm around Luna's slim shoulders.

Harry sat in the armchair closest to them and waited for Luna to get settled down before they talked. There were a lot of questions on his mind and he didn't want to scare the frail-looking girl.

"Thank you for saving my life, Hermione and Harry." Luna said quietly as she sipped her hot chocolate.

Harry raised his eyebrows in confusion. "I don't think I've introduced Hermione or myself. How did you know our names?"

"The Gremles told me."

A look of puzzlement crossed his face. Elissa had never mentioned anything like that in their lessons. He glanced at his wife and saw a similar befuddled look on her face. Hermione had merely shrugged in response.

"Luna, why were you out at such an hour? It's dangerous with all the Dementors patrolling the grounds." Harry asked with worry lacing his tone.

A mild look of surprise had crossed her face before she explained. "My housemates gave me the wrong password by accident and I was locked out of Ravenclaw Tower." Luna answered truthfully. "I didn't want to be caught by Mr Filch or be a bother to the rest of my housemates so I decided to spend the night outside like always. Sometimes, when they forget to inform me of the sudden change of password, I spend the night out in the school ground. I met the Gremles that way." She answered sincerely. Harry could see the innocence in those clear blue eyes.

Hermione's eyes had widened in shock. "It wasn't your first time? Why didn't you inform the Professors?" Good grief, Harry. She has only started her second year.

"People can be forgetful at times due to the influence of the Piages so it is alright." Luna answered simply.

“Why aren’t you wearing your jacket or robes then?” Harry asked soothingly as he fixed a warm smile on his face. He took a great effort to keep his tone gentle since rage was ravaging his body. He could not believe the amount of bullying the young girl was suffering. What nerve the Ravenclaws had to bully such an innocent girl like her. No one has the right to mistreat another person no matter how different they are. Harry growled inwardly.

“It was taken away.” Luna replied simply. “I suspect the Himmles were behind it again. They are quite fascinated with clothes sometimes, but will return them eventually when their interest wanes two weeks later. They are more interested in other things like parchments, ink bottles, and quills most of the time. Those never turn up after they disappear.” Luna went on plainly as she blinked.

Hermione could feel Harry’s anger surging through his body. As much as I want it, you can’t hex the entire house the way you are planning to right now. Hermione thought as she held his hand.

Neither can we allow the mistreatment to continue. Can you imagine what would’ve happened if we didn’t find her in time, dear?

I don’t want to even think about that. We’ll give her our friendship, love. From the way she defends her housemates, I think we’ll get along well. We’ll offer her a place to stay and help her to get even with them. It’s after all her decision if she wants to inform others about the bullying. Hermione answered calmly. If Harry hadn’t been emotionally linked to her, he would’ve thought that she didn’t care from the cool tone of her thoughts, but he could sense she was just as furious as he was. He found himself agreeing to her suggestion. He was glad that he had such a level-headed wife.

“Luna, it’s going to be breakfast soon. Would you fancy a nice warm bath? I’ll give you some clothes so that you can shower and change.” Hermione suggested with a friendly smile on her lips.

“I don’t want to trouble you. I won’t fit into your clothes and I don’t think I’m allowed to enter your dormitory. I’d better return to the

tower.” Luna answered hesitantly as she lowered her head and tried to stand up.

Hermione placed a firm hand on her arm. “I assure you that it won’t be any trouble. We’ll have to go in the dorm for us to explain it to you.” Hermione explained. Luna glanced at their faces and was shocked to see genuine sincerity in their eyes. It was the first time anyone other than her parents had shown so much warmth to her.

Luna did not object when Hermione had taken her arm and led her to smaller sitting room in Gryffindor traditional colours of red and gold. Hedwig was perched on the stand near the window, sleeping soundly. A large ginger cat was seen curled up awkwardly in the basket near the fire.

The basket looked too small for Crookshanks. With an amused smile plastered on his face, Harry kneeled next to the basket and enlarged it as he stroked the cat softly. Luna was watching the couple with deep interest. Luna could see a warm glow of love in Hermione’s eyes as she looked at Harry. The sweet sight of two people in love melted her heart.

“I’m glad that both of you are in love with each other. I’d thought that the two of you were forced into marriage.” Luna smiled genuinely at them.

Harry and Hermione’s jaws had nearly touched the ground at her statement.

“How...” Harry asked as he stared at the petite blonde. He was sure that he had never dropped any hints that they were married.

“The Gremles told me your real names, Harry and Hermione Potter. Would you prefer I use your titles instead, Lord and Lady Gryffindor?” Luna asked quizzically when she realised that they were flabbergasted.

Harry exchanged a quick glance with his wife. “Um... no. We’d rather be called by our names. Well, we actually wanted our marriage to be kept a secret.” Harry answered as he scratched the back of his head

nervously. The next thing that Luna did was another shock to the couple.

"I, Luna Lovegood, swear upon my life and magic that I will not disclose any secrets Potters entrust me with, under any circumstances. So mote it will be." Luna said as she took out her wand.

"You didn't have to take a Wizard Oath. You might die in the future if ever go against it." Hermione protested loudly.

"It's fine. I'm very sure it must be very important to keep your marriage a secret since both of you look as if you can't get enough of each other." Luna answered with a reassuring smile.

The young couple had blushed at her words.

"We didn't want others to know because they might guess the nature of our marriage. We share a soul bond. We don't want the news to get to the wrong ears, hence the need for confidentiality." Hermione answered simply.

"Well, I was thinking along the same lines. After all, it must've been very difficult to stay calm when you see others ogling your mate. Anyway, you said something about showering before heading down for breakfast?" Luna asked as she peered at Harry.

"We are going to alter one set of school uniforms that Hermione bought recently so that you can use it for today. I think I'm going to try to get your things back for you later. They are new. You don't have to worry about undergarments since Hermione will be able to make some for you. She's really good at tailoring." Harry smiled warmly as he checked his watch. With a quick twist of his wrist, the wand was in his palm. "I'll be using the main bathroom. Accio clothes." Harry said. A set of clothes and a towel flew onto his hand. "How I love the convenience of magic." Harry grinned rakishly as he lovingly kissed Hermione's cheeks before heading off.

The Gryffindor common room was empty when Harry had settled in his favourite armchair to revise for his upcoming written potions test

that was taking place after their breakfast as he waited for the two ladies to join him after their bath. He had known the material by heart but his brilliant wife had put her foot down and insisted that they review for it.

It's so Hermione to do so, he chuckled happily. She was forever nagging Ron and him to study. The memories of them spending time together flooded his mind as his heart ached. He closed his eyes and willed the memories away. It was stupid to be thinking about all that. Harry could feel that this was the end of his first friendship. A slight frown marred his face as he stared blankly at the fireplace and the potions book lay forgotten at the side.

"Good morning, Harry. Thinking about Ron?" Neville asked as he sat in the armchair closest to Harry.

"Good morning, Nev. Was it that obvious?" Harry asked flatly as he looked away from the boy.

"Well Harry, the two of you were very close. What else would propel you to attempt to save his soul at the expense of your own, Harry?" Neville answered as he smiled warmly.

"Well, I don't understand how things turned out this way."

"I've no answers for you, Harry. However, I'm sure that he'll probably realise how foolish he is for forsaking a great friend like you and eventually ask for your forgiveness." Neville assured as he clapped him on the back and stood up.

"I guess so. Mind joining Hermione and I for breakfast? We'll have to wait a little longer for her though." Harry asked sincerely.

A shocked expression crossed his face momentarily before a wide smile spread on his lips. "I'd love to, Harry." Neville replied cheerfully as he settled back into his seat. "I hope you don't mind my curiosity. I never heard you entering or leaving the dormitory last night. Where'd you go?"

"I have my own quarters now since I'm now the Head of the Potter family." Harry explained.

"How are you coping with the Potter affairs? I'm sure your muggle relatives didn't teach you about managing a magical household." Neville asked thoughtfully.

"I'm doing okay. The Potter family has a group of dedicated and intelligent house elves that are overseeing most of the day to day affairs. I'm picking up tips as I go along. I have to meet with the head elf later. I guess you can call me the Lord-in-training." Harry answered with humour twinkling in his emerald orbs. Neville laughed.

"You can't do wrong in the eyes of the Wizard Society, Harry, simply because you are Lord Potter and the Boy-who-lived. When are you formally acknowledging your status?" Neville questioned.

"Do I need to throw a party? I thought it could be kept low-key?" Harry asked with surprise in his green eyes.

"Naturally, since you are Head of the Ancient and Noble House, you'll need to throw a party and invite all the Lords of the noble families." Neville explained.

"I must say that your Grandmother has been doing a good job in coaching you. You seem to have an extensive knowledge about all of it." Harry smiled.

"The Longbottom house isn't as distinguished as the Potter house, but we are still an old Wizarding family. Well, Gran has always wanted me to be an outstanding Lord when the time comes for me to inherit the title. However, I'm not really doing well in my studies." Neville answered dejectedly as he lowered his head.

"Great grades do not necessarily mean an outstanding individual. It only means that you have a great grasp of the knowledge that Hogwarts has imparted to you. Take a look at Voldemort. He was an excellent student, but would you consider him an outstanding individual? It is the way one treats others that marks the individual. A great man treats everyone with respect and lives with strong,

honourable convictions. Anyway, I'll be more than happy to help you with your studies if you want." Harry offered with a warm smile.

"It'll be too much of trouble. I'm dismal in a lot of subjects." Neville protested.

"No, you're not. You just lack confidence and confidence is built up by not putting yourself down that way." Harry admonished. Gee, I sound like Hermione. Harry thought.

"I'd love the help, but would you have the time? You have to handle the Potter affairs." Neville asked.

"Well, if you are that concerned, Hermione can always help you. She just loves to share her knowledge with people whenever she can." Harry beamed warmly. It was one of her endearing traits, her selflessness with knowledge.

Neville began laughing when he had peered at Harry. "You really do love Hermione, don't you?"

His emerald eyes glowed with love. "I do. She's the most brilliant girl I've ever met. I was humbled when she agreed to go out with me." Harry admitted honestly.

Most guys would have teased him mercilessly, but not Neville. With a warm, earnest smile on his face, he declared, "I'm glad that the two of you are together. She's really a nice girl. She even offered to help to find Trevor when she saw me searching for something on the train on the first day of school." He said.

"Thank you. You don't know how much this means to us." Harry grinned. Neville is joining us for breakfast, love.

Sure, darling. I don't know why we never got a chance to know Neville better. I learnt so much about him last night during dinner.

Do you mean that slightly chubby guy that Crookshanks was laying comfortably on yesterday? Hedwig asked sleepily.

Yes. Hedwig, why don't you rest some more?

There are a lot of owls in the room waiting for you to intercept their letters. Dobby is doing that now. Hermione called for him to be your personal house elf. I'm waiting for them to leave before I go back to sleep. Anyway, Neville is a nice lad. I thought you didn't have to attend lessons this week? Why are both of you up so early? Hedwig said.

We wanted to do some revision before our exam this afternoon. Besides, Hermione and I are used to waking up before dawn for a jog.

Are you mad? There are Dementors around. You could get hurt. Hedwig protested angrily.

We were fine. Harry assured. However, I think I need your help. We met this girl who's always being bullied by her peers and we saved her from the Dementors this morning. Would you mind accompanying her to her lessons for the rest of the day? I doubt anyone would try to come close to you after last night.

That's a splendid idea, love. Hermione chimed in. What do you think, Hedwig?

Harry could see Hedwig probing through their memories of their new friend. I hate bullies. If I find out who the culprits were....No, all of her housemates should share the same guilt. Just tell me when your breakfast is over and I will follow her. Please remember to inform her too. I 'm going to catch a few winks, Hedwig concluded.

Charles, your head of the house elves, wants to see you too. We'll meet him in the afternoon. Hermione added.

Darling, you are such a thoughtful wife. I nearly forgot about the thing about getting personal house elf. Thank you. Harry thought fondly.

"Why haven't you joined us for meals before? I mean it seems as though over the past two year you've found a good friend in Hermione" Harry began inquisitively as he looked at Neville closely. Neville shifted uncomfortably.

“Ron.” Neville responded as he lowered his head.

Before Harry could ask anything further, the two ladies had finally joined them. “Hi, beautiful.” Harry greeted as he kissed Hermione’s cheek before wrapping his arm possessively around her waist. Neville was surprised to see a Ravenclaw with them but he immediately stood up and before he could introduce himself, the blonde girl spoke.

“Hi, Neville. I’m Luna Lovegood.” Luna introduced herself with a friendly smile. Her blue eyes were glowing with sincerity as she looked at the slightly chubby boy in front of her.

“How did you know my name?” Neville asked in surprise, as he glanced at Hermione and Harry. Hermione was laying her cheek on Harry’s chest. The young couple seemed like they were lost in their own world. Neville glanced back at the girl standing in front of him.

“The Gremles, of course. I’m really sorry to learn about your parents. They are such wonderful people.” Luna stated honestly.

“H-how?” Neville asked, his brown eyes widening in shock.

“The Gremles, remember? They remember every single one that went through Hogwarts and had told me about them.” Luna answered as she smiled. “They told me about your parents because I asked them about you. I usually see you alone.” Luna added casually.

Neville’s face had turned red as he lowered his head. To save him from more embarrassment, Harry decided to speak up. “I don’t know about you, but I’m famished. Let’s head down to the Great Hall for breakfast.” Harry said in mock solemnity.

“It’s getting late. Let’s go.” Luna added with a bright smile.

The Great Hall was already quite full with students when the four of them entered the place. Everyone was staring at them as if they were on display, but the couple ignored them and went to their seats. The Professors were sitting at the Staff table having their breakfast and Harry and Hermione shot an affectionate smile at Hagrid before they

sat down. The half- giant had returned the smile and gave them thumbs up, which made the young couple beam. It was evident that he was very happy about their relationship.

“I’m glad that the Weasleys aren’t here. With their tempers, things could get ugly.” Neville spoke as he glanced across the Gryffindor table and didn’t see any of the redheads.

“I can’t believe he had the cheek to think of Harry that way!” Hermione hissed. “He better be glad that it was Hedwig and Crookshanks punishing him rather than me.” Hermione said coolly as she started eating her breakfast. Luna immediately changed the subject and started to tell them about her father. They learned that her father was the editor of the “Quibbler” how he takes her with him on his explorations. As she shared these experiences with them, they found it all difficult to believe but they were still very fascinated by her tales. Hermione and Neville soon joined in the conversation with tales about their own family. It was an enjoyable meal for all of them as they learned more about each other.

The hall had suddenly become silent when a certain seventh year strode briskly down the hall towards them and stood behind Harry. His face was as red as his hair as he glared furiously at the cheerful raven-haired boy. The gleam in his emerald eyes had died when he saw who was standing behind him.

“Good morning Percy, is there something I can do for you?” Harry asked politely after he stood up. Despite his cool tone, everyone could hear the warning lacing his tone. Even though he was only in his third year, he was already the same height as Percy.

“I want to formally call you out for a duel for my honour.” The insolent Head boy said as he threw his chest out pompously.

“I have no interest in accepting your challenge.” Harry answered idly. “Was there anything else?”

Much to Harry’s surprise, Percy’s face had turned redder. “How dare you reject...”

"I have every right to since you have no reason to call me out. You were the one who threatened my familiar with magic. I was gracious enough not to call you out for that. Leave before you become a disgrace." Harry answered impassively.

"You took my brother's girl, snapped his wand, broke his arm, set your familiar on him, and beat me in front of everyone by using a sneak attack. You say I have no cause to call you out for a duel? You are just a coward!" Percy roared.

"Don't be so daft, Weasley. Let's get this straight because I don't like others to have a bad impression of my girlfriend. Hermione was never your brother's girl. We were dating since the start of the holidays. Was your brother with her during his second year? He wasn't. Everyone in Gryffindor can tell you that. That is all I have to say to you." Harry answered as he settled back into his seat. He looked at his wife, "Where were we before we were interrupted?" Harry asked his company politely.

"Ah huh!" Percy shouted triumphantly with a satisfied smile on his face, "You didn't refute the other claims which meant that they were true. I can call you out for a duel for harming my..."

Before he could continued, the Weasley twins had intervened. One of them had wrapped his hand over his mouth as both of them tugged him out of the Great Hall. "Stop making a fool of yourself. I'm sorry, Harry." One of them called as they wrestled the struggling Percy out of the hall. Harry and Hermione exchanged surprised looks at the sudden change of event.

"I didn't think Percy was so concerned about his brothers. I guess I was wrong." Neville added sheepishly.

"No, he's more worried about his reputation. He lost to a third year in front of everyone yesterday. Naturally, he wants to get back his honour. I really don't understand what Clearwater sees in him." Harry answered as he shrugged.

"That's mean, love." Hermione admonished. "She is a rather nice girl."

"I agree. She always tries to make an effort to talk to me and help me. She helps me to find my things whenever the Himmles take them away." Luna added.

"Oh?" Harry answered as he raised one of his eyebrows. "That's comforting to hear." He smiled. "However, I'd rather you don't spend your nights in the Ravenclaw tower."

"Thanks, Harry and Hermione." Luna smiled.

"It's nothing much. We will do what we can for you." Hermione smiled comfortingly as she placed a hand on Luna's hand.

"Why don't you want Luna to stay in her own dormitory, Harry?" Neville asked curiously as he glanced at the three of them.

"This morning we found her sleeping outside of the castle because her housemates had given her the wrong password." Harry said crossly.

"What?! There are Dementors patrolling the entrances of the school. That's very dangerous for her!"

"Well, I don't think it's such a bad thing. It's led me to meeting the three of you." Luna smiled.

After breakfast, while the other students trooped to their first lesson, Harry and Hermione made their way to the Headmaster's office to have their written and practical Potions exams. Professor Dumbledore had given them an O.W.L.-standard Potions examination and they had finished it with ease. Harry and Hermione were glad that they were able to take the exam with confidence.

"Harry and Hermione, would you mind having a chat with me before you leave? You don't have any exams later, do you?" Dumbledore asked as he conjured some snacks for them.

"No, we have a little time right now. We'll need to make a certain arrangements with the house elves in the Potter family later and

revise for our other tests. Is there something important you needed to discuss, sir?" Harry answered. Do you have any inkling why he wants to talk to us? Harry thought.

It must be our sudden improvement in terms of controlling our magic. The Professor probably wants to know how we managed that. Hermione replied.

How much should we tell? Harry asked.

The bare bones, Hermione smiled. Even though the enemy of my enemy is my friend, I think it's better to be cautious.

"I watched both of you creating the required potions and I was wondering how did you managed to achieve this standard of brewing. The both of you looked as if you could probably take your mastery in potions and pass." Professor Dumbledore explained with a smile.

"Are we really that good?" Harry inquired with surprise. "We've been reading in advance and practising at home." Harry answered simply.

"Yes, I was quite surprised." Dumbledore answered as he looked at them closely. "I never asked, but why do the two of you want to finish your O. so soon and keep it secret?"

"First, it's always beneficial to have knowledge. The O.W.L.s are a benchmark for our learning. Second, with more time on hand, Hermione and I want to continue training ourselves to have greater control of our magic. Furthermore, we want to ensure that we are adequately prepared just in case I have to face Voldemort again." Harry explained. At that statement, Dumbledore's eyes had widened in surprise. "I remember how my mother died. He didn't want my parents' lives. He only wanted mine. I don't understand why he chose me, but this means that he'll do anything to kill me and I want to be ready for it. I want to be able to fight him." Harry answered. "I can't do that if I don't even have the basic skills needed, hence the haste to complete my education. I'm sure you understand the need for all of this to be kept in secret."

"Harry, you're safe here. You don't have to sound as if you are preparing for war." Dumbledore declared as he clasped his hands and peered at them. Hermione and Harry seemed to be rather unaffected.

"Sir, if I was truly safe then I wouldn't have met Voldemort in my first and second year. Besides, it's always prudent to be prepared for all circumstances. Surely you agree that more training is better than less." Harry stated simply.

"I do, but I'm reluctant to allow you and Hermione to be saddled with this heavy burden at such a tender age." Dumbledore replied. Harry and Hermione's faces were devoid of any strong emotions, but from the tone of Harry's voice, he was determined to have his way.

"Sir, the choice was made for me on that fateful night." Harry returned forcefully. A streak of guilt had appeared momentarily on the old man's face. "Besides, we're having fun doing this. We love knowledge, Sir. Moreover, I really want to make certain that we have more time to enjoy life. Right now, you know very well that I could be a sitting duck if Riddle chooses to come after me again." Harry added as he peered at the old man closely.

Professor Dumbledore sighed. "I was hoping you could enjoy more time as a normal teenager. Anyway, I also wanted to give this to you." He said as he took the Gryffindor Sword and handed it to Harry. "The blood of Gryffindor runs through you, therefore you are the rightful owner of this blade." Harry drew the sword out in one swift movement from its scabbard of gold and red and raised the blade into the light. The blade was simple but had a lethal beauty about it. Harry had never properly admired it last year but now he could. It was a single-handed, long broadsword that had rubies on its hilt. The blade of the sword had shined in the light. Harry gingerly picked the sword up. The sword felt like it was a part of him and Harry knew he could wield it in ease. Harry had finally found his weapon.

"Thank you." Harry answered as he slid the sword swiftly back into the scabbard. "I want to ensure that I survive the battle for Hermione's sake. If I perish, she will die with me." A flash of guilt appeared in his eyes. "I can't allow that." Harry declared firmly as he

cast a loving look at his wife. "We'll need the information and expertise of people who had experience the war to prepare us." Harry said sincerely.

The honesty of Harry's tone convinced the old man that he was foolish in thinking that Harry and Hermione could be dark. Harry was fighting for the survival of his love. Yet, he was unable to set aside the pride of an old man, admit his follies, and lend them some assistance. Harry was right about the part that he was the one fated to fight Voldemort. It was difficult for Dumbledore to acknowledge the passing of his time.

"I'll consider your request, Harry." Dumbledore added tiredly. "You have an appointment soon, right? Best be going."

Harry and Hermione exchanged glances with each other. "Sure Sir. Thank you for the refreshments" Harry nodded politely as he picked up his sword. The young couple bid him a good day, excused themselves, and headed towards their quarters.

"The Professor seemed to be bordering on a personal crisis. I didn't think that my request would have such a great impact." Harry said as he scratched his chin. They were comfortably settled in their own sitting room. The Gryffindor sword was placed in their bedroom.

"Pride comes with age. People who have lived past the century mark tend to think that they are invincible. I think it's something the Professor needs to get over. I think he may have done things that he doesn't want others to judge him by as well." Hermione added simply after much thought.

"I have a feeling that it's those things he's trying to hide that we need to know about. The professor is intimately connected to the betrayal of my parents because he was the leader of the light back then. It was at his suggestion that my parents used a Fidelius charm. What if he was the one who allowed them to put Sirius Black in prison without a trial?" Harry asked.

"Why would he want to do that? He knew that the secret keeper was Pettigrew." Hermione, playing the devil's advocate, questioned.

"I think it would suggest that he's trying to keep Sirius quiet, wouldn't you agree? Sirius was the initial secret keeper, it was switched to Pettigrew, and then the betrayal took place. So Sirius Black would have had first-hand knowledge of the whole betrayal. If the Professor was the one who suggested to my parents to switch to Pettigrew, then the betrayal took place because of his folly. I guess we still need another piece to fall in place before we can conclude anything decisively. But, if this is the truth, this means that the Professor is way too manipulative for his own good." Harry answered as he shuddered.

"We'll just have to be even more careful. I was thinking about talking to Professor McGonagall after our test." Hermione suggested. Hermione suddenly recalled the guilt he felt when he told the Professor he could cause the death of her by dying. "Harry, my life will hold no meaning if you weren't alive. In fact, I'd be better off dead. For that I am glad that I'll only live as long as you do." Hermione smiled lovingly.

Harry raked his hand through his black hair. "Darling, you could live well without me. I mean you lived about twelve years of your life happily before you met me. You've mum and dad to consider, too. If we didn't have this soul bond and I died in the hands of Riddle, I would want you to continue living in joy. I love you so much that I wouldn't want to see you waste your life." Harry added emotionally as he looked at his wife.

"Do you think that I love you less? I love you so much that I would cease breathing if I ever find out that you're gone - the pain will be unbearable. Instead of being preoccupied with death, I'd rather we celebrate every single day I share with you, Harry. " A soft smile touched her lips.

Tender emerald eyes met the soft brown ones. Love was evident in their eyes and it drew the couple together like gravity. They kissed.

Hermione was sitting contently in his lap when Harry remembered that they had to meet the head house elf. "Charles, can we meet you now?" Harry called out politely. A familiar crack was heard and an old

and dignified house elf appeared in front of them. He was dressed neatly in a suit that had the Potter crest on the pocket of the jacket.

“Good afternoon, my Lord and my Lady.” He greeted gravely with his deep voice as he did a brief bow. “I am Charles, the Head elf. I’ve been serving the Potter family faithfully for 6 generations. It is an honour to meet my Lord and my Lady.”

“Don’t stand on ceremony with us. We would rather be addressed by our names, Harry and Hermione.” Harry requested courteously.

“Please pardon my reluctance to do so. You are Lord and Lady Potter now. I must respectfully insist that you practice getting used to it.” Charles replied stiffly with a bow.

Hermione smiled. He’s a stickler for formalities, dear. I think it’s better if you don’t insist.

“That’s fine, Charles. What is it that you wished to speak to me about?” Harry asked.

“I need to discuss your ball with you. It is customary that we host a ball and invite all the Heads of the Noble houses to attend so that you can be formally introduced to them. Since my Lord is still in school, the ball would be held during the Christmas Holidays. My Lord and my Lady need to do a bit of preparation so that you won’t embarrass yourselves. These are books on the History of Potters. My Lord and Lady must read them before the ball.” Charles said politely as he handed them two thick tomes.

“Host a ball? Isn’t it a bit too soon?” Harry asked in surprise.

“There is really no point hiding, my Lord, since you are acknowledging your position in school. A ceremony befitting of your status is important in establishing ties within the Wizard Society. It is advisable to make allies and not enemies.”

“That’s wise of you, Charles.” Hermione added approvingly. “We’ll have the ball during the Christmas holidays, then. I will not attending

as Lady Potter though. We both were thinking of announcing our marriage only after I come of age.”

“As you wish, my Lady and my Lord. This will give us the opportunity to prepare for a lavish wedding. Dobby tells me that my Lord and my Lady had a small marriage ceremony several months ago, is that correct?”

“Yes. Dobby was a great help.” Harry answered with a smile as he played with his wife’s brown tresses.

“I think my Lord will be happy to know that in your absence, I put Dobby through an intense training. He is now fully able to assist you in all aspects of my Lord’s duties.” Charles announced.

Dobby speaks very eloquently now. He is really a changed elf. Hermione added.

“I’m glad that you thought of that. I’m not too familiar with what my new position entails.” Harry admitted sheepishly. I guess we’re not the only ones who went through a makeover.

“Don’t worry, my Lord. We will guide you through your duties. Dobby will inform you of the more important duties later, my Lord. If my Lord requires my services, I will be more than happy to help as well.”

“Thank you, Charles. And thank you for maintaining the household in my absence.” Harry returned graciously.

“It is my honour to serve the Potter family, my Lord and my Lady. Do my Lord and Lady still require my assistance?” Charles asked politely.

“No, that will be all. Have a good day.” Harry smiled warmly.

“Have a good day, my Lord and Lady.” With a ‘crack’, the imposing old house elf disappeared.

“Charles is too educated to be a house elf.” Harry commented.

“Dobby tells me that at the Potter mansion, there’s a school for house elves. They are taught to speak and write well, along with many other subjects.” Hermione smiled at the thought. “I was surprised why they did not spread the need to educate their house elves to other families.” Hermione said as she turned her body to face him.

“I guess the other families didn’t want it. I’m sure that most of the elves would’ve run away from the families if they were educated. Education would open their eyes and make them see that they are unfairly oppressed.” Harry smiled as he nuzzled her neck playfully.

“I think it is lunch time for both Luna and Neville. Let’s head down and meet them.” Hermione suggested. Harry lifted her off his lap and placed her on her feet easily.

“Let’s go, Angel.” Harry said affectionately, as he took her hand and walked out of the sitting room.

A/N: Hi everyone, hope you enjoy the chapter. I want to thank my beta reader,frustr8dwriter for doing such an wonderful job. Thanks for all who have reviewed for the last chapter! Well, please kindly tell me what you think about this chapter. Please be informed that one of the updates will be late because I will be away from the 11-18 July. Have a great week ahead =)

Chapter 9

Beta read by frustr8dwriter

The stunned expression on Professor McGonagall's usually stern face made Harry crack up in laughter. Hermione shot a glare at him as she tried to contain her mirth at seeing him clutching his stomach and laughing hysterically. We are still in an exam, love. She admonished.

The young couple were taking a Transfiguration practical exam in the empty Transfiguration classroom that evening after their dinner. Professor McGonagall had assigned them an O.W.L level question. Harry was busy playing with the object he had transfigured. Both of them had finished transfiguring a porcupine into a cushion. Harry decided to change the shape of his cushion so that it would become a back support and was idly deciding on the colour of the object by rapidly changing them with a touch of his wand. That was when Professor McGonagall had walked out of her office to check on them and was stunned at their achievement.

When Harry managed to calm down, Professor McGonagall spoke.

"I can see that both of you have finished your Transfigurations perfectly. Excellent work. The sixth years, who've passed that O.W.L, would probably have difficulty beating this speed. You know it is an 'O' from me for this work." She added with a rare smile on her face as she glanced at the two teenagers proudly.

Harry could feel his wife's elation at being praised by her favourite Professor and smiled. Professor McGonagall had been a great mentor to both of them so Harry decided to make her something to thank her for her time. Harry proceeded to place a charm on the back support and changed it to pink before giving it to Professor McGonagall. "This is for your, Professor. Hopefully it will help make you feel more comfortable during all the long hours you spend sitting behind the desk. It will magically adjust to fit your back perfectly." Harry smiled warmly.

"Harry, love, you forgot something." Hermione interrupted as she conjured a band attaching the back support and placed a charm on it so that it could magically alter itself to fit into the chair before handing it to Professor McGonagall.

Harry nodded approvingly at her modifications. "My meticulous wife always thinks of everything." He complimented with a wide smile as he placed his arm around her shoulders and drew her to him. Her fair cheeks were tinted red with embarrassment from his praise.

There was a gleam of approval in her brown eyes as she peered at the young couple through her square rimmed black spectacles. The sight of the young couple being so in love made her romantic heart melt. Professor McGonagall smiled at them in gratitude. "Thank you, Harry and Hermione. This is such a thoughtful gift. I must admit that no matter how gifted James was at transfiguration, he was not as good as either of you in his third year."

Harry responded by scratching the back of his head in embarrassment and Hermione's cheeks had turned redder.

"We're able to transfigure this well because of my Dad. He shared with us the secret behind Transfiguration. It all lies in the visualising and the belief." Harry explained as he tapped with a happy smile on his face. Hermione nodded her head in agreement. "My parents kept their journals in the safe," Harry continued when noticed saw the unspoken question written all over the Professor's face. "That reminds me – we were reading the journal and something we came across doesn't make much sense. Would you answer a few questions for us?" Harry asked politely.

"What is it?" Professor McGonagall asked as she looked at the young couple.

"We know that Sirius Black was my father's good friend. Why was Sirius Black sent to Azkaban? We know he was not given a trial. Even the Lestranges were allowed a trial despite the fact that everyone knew that they committed many atrocities. Why wasn't Sirius Black given the same opportunity?" Harry questioned.

“You learnt about him from your parents’ journals?” Professor McGonagall asked in surprise as she looked at the young couple thoughtfully. The tender expression on her face was replaced by a grim one. They nodded. She felt there was no point in hiding what she knew from them since they were already considered legal adults in the Wizard World. Moreover, Harry had the right to know about the betrayal of his family. “Let’s head to my office and have a chat about it.” She answered as she led them into her adjoining office.

The young couple silently settled in the chairs in front of the large desk as Professor McGonagall sat behind her desk. Professor McGonagall had attached the back support to her office chair as soon as she had entered the office. The elder witch had a satisfied expression on her face when she was finally able to sit in her chair. Her momentary contentment had faded as she considered the issue thoughtfully while she conjured cups of tea for them.

Professor McGonagall took a sip of her tea daintily before beginning the tale. “You already know that Sirius and James were close as brothers, so I always had my doubts about the official reason Sirius was placed behind bars. It was true that most of the Blacks were Death Eaters, but I never saw that streak in Sirius Black. Yet, Sirius was rumoured to be Lord Voldemort’s loyal supporter. We were told that he was placed behind bars for betraying the Potters to Lord Voldemort and killing a street full of people. Even his good friend, Peter Pettigrew, was killed when he confronted Sirius Black. This is all that I know.” Professor McGonagall explained as took another sip of her tea.

Hermione and Harry exchanged a confused look between them. “They were under the Fidelius charm. No one but the Secret Keeper could betray them.” Hermione said as she quirked her eyebrows in disbelief.

“Sirius was their Secret Keeper.” Professor McGonagall stated simply, with sadness in her brown eyes. “Professor Dumbledore was there when James and Lily made him the Secret Keeper.”

“My parents had changed their secret keeper at the last minute. According to my Dad, the Death Eaters were most likely going to go

after Sirius Black since it was known how close they were. They decided to switch to Peter Pettigrew. My parents died the next day.” Harry explained before pausing. A question suddenly came to mind. “Who placed him into Azkaban without a trial?” Harry asked.

Professor McGonagall gasped at the information. “Sirius Black did not betray them? Pettigrew did? Sirius was innocent?” She collapsed back into her chair and took a shaky sip of her tea. “Professor Dumbledore did. He testified that Sirius was the Potters’ Secret Keeper. He might not have known that the Potters changed their Secret Keeper at the last minute. We’ll need to tell Professor Lupin about this. He was their good friend.”

Professor McGonagall briskly walked to the fireplace near them, grabbed some green Floo powder and threw them into the flames. “Remus Lupin. I need to talk to you.” Professor McGonagall spoke in a clear and firm voice. The head of Professor Lupin immediately popped out from the fire. “What can I do for you, Professor McGonagall?” He asked politely as he looked around the room. “Oh, hello there, Harry. I’m glad to see you’re looking quite well. And you, young lady - you must be Miss Hermione Granger, I presume?” He asked as he smiled warmly at the young couple.

“Good evening, Professor Lupin.” They chorused politely. “Yes, I’m Hermione. Thank you for saving Harry’s life.” She beamed sincerely in return. Harry could feel the overwhelming feeling of gratitude in her and Harry held her hand with his.

That gesture did not went unnoticed by Professor Lupin.

“Thank you, Professor Lupin.” Harry beamed with equal earnestness.

“It is the duty of the teacher to protect the students, Miss Granger and Mr. Potter.” Professor Lupin concluded with a smile as he glanced at the young couple. “What did you need to speak to me about?” He asked as he turned his attention back to Professor McGonagall.

“We’ve made a startling discovery about the Potters’ betrayal. Would you rather hear it in person in my office or hear it now?” Professor McGonagall returned briskly.

His eyes widened immediately and he said, "I'll be right over." His head immediately disappeared from the roaring flames.

Harry thought it was better to back up his claims so he summoned the journals to the office. "Accio journals!" Harry called out as he concentrated on the journals. The journals soon sped into his hand and he placed the blue and red journals on Professor McGonagall's desk. Professor Lupin swept into the office with great haste, looking more dishevelled than before but there was a gleam of alertness in his eyes.

"Good evening once again, Professor Lupin." Harry and Hermione greeted him politely. Professor Lupin smiled and greeted them back.

"Now on to business. " Professor McGonagall interrupted briskly. "Mr. Potter and Miss Granger finished their aptitude test with me a short while ago and they did well." Professor McGonagall said with a warm smile. "After the exam, Mr. Potter informed me that he had several questions regarding his parents' betrayal. During the discussion, we made an astounding discovery." She paused and turned to Harry. "Mr. Potter, would you care to share?"

"Sirius Black is innocent. The Secret Keeper was not Black – it was Pettigrew and he was the one who betrayed them. My parents wrote in their last entry, dated a day before Halloween that they had switched the Secret Keeper. Pettigrew betrayed them the next day." Harry announced as he flipped to the last entry of his father's diary to authenticate his statement.

Professor Lupin hurriedly read the last entry in James's Journal. "James really wrote that! It's in James's handwriting. Sirius is really innocent." He exclaimed as he collapsed into his seat with the journal in his hand. "I should've known that Sirius would never betray James. It makes more sense that he committed murder to take revenge on behalf of your parents."

"If revenge was the reason, it doesn't explain why Sirius Black is heading towards Hogwarts. There must be something important he has to do to risk getting thrown back into Azkaban again." Hermione

said thoughtfully as she bit her bottom lips. "I think that it might have to do with the betrayal of Harry's parents."

"Dear, it is our parents. Voldemort and our parents are out of the picture. We're only left with the betrayer. Is he confirmed dead?" Harry asked as scratched his chin with his free hand.

"All they found was his finger. A baker's dozen were blasted into pieces that day. I'm not too sure if they managed to assemble even half of the bodies with all the fragments." Professor McGonagall answered. "You'll have to check the files on the Sirius Black's case to confirm this."

"We'll definitely need to find out. If they had put together a dozen bodies, it would suggest that Pettigrew is alive. It makes no sense if the other bodies can be pieced together while the only thing the Ministry found was Pettigrew's finger." Hermione continued as she chewed on her bottom lips furiously.

Angel, you are driving me mad with all that biting. I can't think when you do that. Harry thought with great exasperation. When Hermione glanced at him, she realised that he was averting his gaze away from her so that he could concentrate on the matter on hand.

Sorry dear, you know it's my habit to do that. Hermione thought in amusement.

You look too adorable for your own good sometimes, Angel.

Oh hush, love. Now you're distracting me. Hermione answered curtly. Harry could feel her slight embarrassment and joy.

"You mean that there is a possibility that Pettigrew is alive? If he is, then Sirius couldn't have committed any of the crimes that he was placed behind bars for. We wouldn't be speculating about this if the Ministry had just investigated the case and checked his wand." Professor Lupin said.

"I agree. This means we have to check the case file at the Ministry. If that speculation is confirmed, we'll know that Sirius is here for

Pettigrew and that Sirius is innocent. Professor McGonagall, would it be possible for you to access the case file?" Harry asked politely.

"I would like love to, but I can't. It'll raise suspicion." Professor McGonagall answered sadly.

"Harry, you can do it yourself! You're Lord Potter now. You can request to check on recent convictions made without a trial for reference during the weekends. If permission is denied, you can always request for files that are related to the betrayal of the Potters." Hermione suggested excitedly.

"You are brilliant, my love." Harry exclaimed as he spontaneously kissed her briefly on her lips. "If we do find Sirius first, then we can save all the trouble." Harry said thoughtfully. "What does Sirius look like when he is in his Animagus form? I'm certain that must be the reason why he was able to escape from Azkaban. Dementors are blind. Being in his animagus form would also help him remain undetected in the Wizarding world since he is unregistered."

Both Professors looked dumfounded. "An unregistered animagus?" Professor McGonagall questioned as her eyes widened in shock.

Professor Lupin lowered his head sheepishly. "It was because of me. They each learned to become animagi so they could keep me company at Hogwarts." He replied looking at McGonagall meaningfully. "To answer Harry's question, he's a large black dog. I know that the description isn't helpful at all." Professor Lupin smiled feebly. "I guess we'll still have to stick to the original plan, Pronglet. Since you know my identity, you can always call me Uncle Moony in private if you wish. I know you probably find it awkward since I never visited you while you were growing up. Professor Dumbledore didn't want me to because the Magical world might've found out. Even though you are an adult in the eyes of the Magical society, you're still young. I can't really help you that much but you are welcome to talk to me anytime you need me." Professor Lupin answered with a sad smile on his face as he placed a hand on Harry's shoulder.

Professor McGonagall, seeing that it was a private moment between them, sensibly left her office silently.

Harry understood Remus' true intentions. Harry read the remorse he felt in not being there for him through thirteen years of his life because of his restrictions. Lupin had wanted to fill in the role of a father in his life. He finally had a relative. With a genuine smile plastered on Harry's face, he spoke emotionally, "Uncle Moony, it is alright. I know that you're unable to care for me because of your furry problem."

Lupin crackled in mirth at that term. "That's how your father termed my affliction. He'd never looked at me any differently even though he had witnessed many of my transformations. It's because of James that even during my transformation, I was able to keep some parts of my humanity intact." He beamed distantly. "Well, now we have a potion for that."

"Uncle Moony, I have someone important I need to introduce to you." Harry began, as a warm smile spread across his face. Harry was feeling nervous at how Professor Lupin would react. Would he approve of his mate? Was this how a guy feels when he introduces the girl he loves to his family for the first time? Yes, Uncle Moony was family.

Harry wrapped his arm around Hermione's shoulders lovingly. "Well, you've already met, but this is my wife, Hermione." He smiled indulgently as he watched the array of emotions played out on Lupin's face. He was shocked by the news initially but it was soon replaced by a look of approval and happiness.

Harry's heart soared.

"I didn't expect that you'd be married at such a tender age. James and Lily would be delighted to know they have such a brilliant daughter-in-law. When I saw her with you on the train, I was really hoping that you'd never let her go because both of you looked so good together." Lupin smiled contentedly.

"We're soul mates." Harry explained as he lifted her hand to his lips and brushed them against her knuckles tenderly. Hermione had blushed at the gesture. "She completes me." Harry smiled adoringly

as he glanced at his wife. "We wanted to keep our marriage a secret because anyone can guess the nature of our relationship easily if they put all the pieces together."

"A wise move, I must say." Professor Lupin grinned. "The element of surprise is very important in war." Turning to face Hermione, he spoke, "Hermione, you may also call me Uncle Moony, if you'd like. I know it's a little odd for me to say this, but please take good care of Harry. Given what happened on the train, it's obvious he needs a level-headed girl like you to rein him in." He said kindly as he glanced at the brown hair witch. He chuckled inwardly. It was apparent that all Potter men love highly intelligent girls.

Her chocolate hued eye glowed with happiness as she looked at Lupin. "Yes, Uncle Moony. I'll try my best." She smiled affectionately as she cast a side glance at him. Harry held up his hands in the posture of surrender. The smile on Lupin's face grew.

"I think its best we go to bed. It's going to be curfew soon and you don't want to keep Professor McGonagall waiting outside of her own office." Professor Lupin suggested as he stood up. Harry had immediately stood up to draw the chair out for Hermione. "That's really sweet of you, Harry. Your father didn't learn to do that for your mother until his seventh year." He chuckled heartily. "Goodnight, Pronglet. Goodnight, Hermione. I shall see both of you tomorrow evening."

They bid Professor McGonagall a good night before heading to their quarters.

Harry and Hermione, with hands linked, were walking quietly next to each other towards the Gryffindor tower. "I asked Dobby to add a bedroom for Luna to our quarters before we left for dinner." Hermione beamed brightly.

Harry grinned when he saw the happiness evident on her face. Harry was pleased that she finally had a female friend. He'd read somewhere that it was good for girls to have a girlfriend to talk to because they can share all their girl woes with each other. Not that Harry minded Hermione sharing some of her woes with him, but he

was certain that there would be certain things that Hermione won't want to share with him.

"You really like her, don't you?" Harry questioned as he wrapped his arms around her tiny waist.

A slight tinge of red coloured her fair cheeks as she lowered her head. "Luna's a nice girl. Don't you like her too?"

"I do. She's really a nice person to have around. I'm glad that you're doing all this for her, but will you get her in trouble? Someone might report it." Harry quirked one of his eyebrows as he peered at the girl next to him.

"Anyone who'd report it would be a Ravenclaw wouldn't he?" Hermione posed. "It'd provide us with a good opportunity to tell Professor Flitwick why she's staying with us. He'd punish them." Hermione continued nonchalantly as Harry laughed. His laughter died when he realised that they were not alone as they walked past a dark corner. Harry released the wand into his palm and walked slowly.

I think that there are two of them. They came out from one of the secret passageways. I can't fathom why we actually need these passageways. Hermione added. Her brown orbs had narrowed in concentration and she had her wand in her hand too.

We've used them to our advantage too, dear. They are making an unusual amount of racket to be sneaking up on someone. Harry commented. Harry and Hermione turned into a corner and waited for their noisy stalkers.

The Weasley twins soon appeared with a map in their hands. "Good evening, gentlemen." Harry grinned as he watched Fred and George stare at them with disbelief written all over their faces. "You were making a din." He added factually.

"We wanted to apologise and warn you about our idiotic brothers' antics, but we didn't see you in the dorm..."

"Or at the Great Hall for meals-"

“-So we decided to track both of you down.”

“We found a big secret about both of you.” They chorused. Two identical evil smirks appeared on the twins’ faces. Speaking to the twins was akin to watching a tennis match.

One of the Weasley twins, Harry could never tell Fred and George apart because they were identical twins, whipped out an old parchment. One of them placed his wand on the blank parchment and whispered, “I solemnly swear that I’m up to no good.” At once, thin ink lines began to spread like a spider’s web from the point the wand touched. They joined each other, they criss-crossed, they fanned into every corner of the parchment. Words began to blossom across the top, great, curly green words that proclaimed:

Messrs Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs

Purveyors of Aids to Magical Mischief-Makers

Are proud to present

THE MARAUDER’S MAP

It was the map showing every detail of the Hogwarts Castle and its grounds. The truly remarkable thing was the tiny ink dots moving around it, each labelled a name in minuscule writing. Apparently the map showed everyone. It was the four dots standing near the Gryffindor tower that caught his attention. The one standing in front of him on his left was Fred Weasley. George was the one holding the map. There was a dot with his name, ‘Harry Potter’ and another black dot beside him with the name ‘Hermione Potter’.

Good grief. Harry paled when he realised that the cat was out of the bag. Ironically, it was his father and his friends’ work that unravelled the secret. He quickly assumed a stoic expression as he faced the twins.

“So how long have the both of you been keeping this secret?” Fred asked plainly as his smile grew.

"This isn't the place to talk about it." Harry declared as he summoned the map into his hands as the twins protested. "Mischief managed." He spoke as he pointed the wand to it. The parchment became blank immediately.

"How did you know the way to blank it?" Fred asked in shock.

"I know the identities of the four Marauders." He answered as he led them into the Gryffindor common room. It was empty since everyone had gone up to bed. Hermione quickly cast a spell to prevent others from eavesdropping into their conversation.

"You know these four great men?" Fred asked in awe.

"Yes, I do." Harry confirmed, before changing the subject. "We were married during the summer holidays and we wanted to keep our marriage a secret from the magical world because it might attract unwanted attention. As you know, Lord Voldemort's supporters are out there, I don't want to get a wind of this. The simplest way was to hide it." Harry stated simply.

"I see—"

"-Ickle Harrikins' all grown up and getting married—" George wiped a mock tear from his eyes as Fred fanned himself exaggeratedly. Hermione giggled at their antics.

"We'll keep it a secret, Harry and Hermione."

"I know that my brothers are not very nice to you even though you saved —"

"-Ron's irritating ass. I'll try to keep them away from you and Hermione."

"I must warn you about our sister. She has a crush on you—"

"-since she is young and she didn't take the news of your dating well."

Hermione had knitted her eyebrows together at the news and Harry gave her hand a comforting squeeze.

"I mean which girl has since you started to look so good-

"Even Angelina and Katie were swooning about you. The best part is I can't tell her that you've been taken out of the market." Fred grumbled.

Harry clapped his back comfortingly. "You have my sincere thanks." Harry beamed. "May I borrow the map? I have some uses for it." Harry asked.

"Sure, we've remembered all the secret passageways-

"-out of Hogwarts. We'll be happy to give it to you."

"Thank you." Harry beamed. "Good night, we're heading up to bed. By the way, have you two learned Occlumency before?" He asked.

"It is one of the pre-requisites of being a mischief maker in Hogwarts."

"So you won't worry who's reading your thoughts. Good night." They answered as they trooped up to the boy's dorm.

"Are we making a mistake in trusting them?" Hermione asked as they entered their own quarters.

"Even if it is a mistake, it is too late to do anything about it." Harry replied.

"I think it isn't a mistake to trust the Weasley twins. They're different from the other Weasley siblings like the Head boy, the sister, and the youngest brother." Luna commented dreamily as she observed them. "They have a different aura from the rest of their family. They're definitely more trustworthy than the others." Luna went on as she sat by the window, stroking Hedwig.

"How was your day, Luna?" Harry asked. "Do you like your new room?"

"Hedwig is good company. I think she was rather bored by the lessons but she was a good help. I like the room. It's very nice." Luna answered.

Harry glanced at the beautiful white owl perched on Luna's leg.

I scared plenty of irritating Ravenclaws. Some tried to make fun of her but hurried away when I glared at them. It was good fun. Hedwig added gleefully. I still think that you should teach them a lesson.

I was thinking along the same lines too.

"Would you like to move in with us permanently? We worry about you when you're with the Ravenclaws." Harry gently asked the frail-looking girl.

"Would be too much trouble?" She asked emotionally.

"No, not at all." Hermione added sincerely as she placed a hand on her arm.

"We're more worried about causing you more trouble. Hermione can tell you that I'm a magnet for trouble." Harry grinned playfully. "Welcome aboard."

Hermione gave the petite girl a hug. "We'll go with you to get your things from your dorm tomorrow."

Harry and Hermione were greeted by Hermione's pet when they entered their bedroom.

Hi, Hermione and Harry. I hope you like your new pillows. Crookshanks spoke suddenly as he looked expectantly at Harry. They're on your bed. Can I keep an eye on her too? Crookshanks asked as Hermione bent down to carry him into her arms and stroked his thick ginger fur. Hedwig was allowed to follow Luna around because she could fly out of trouble easily and could also keep them informed about any situation that might arise.

"Crookshanks, I rather you didn't. I'm worried that you might be hexed." Hermione answered as she stroked him tenderly.

Please? Crookshanks asked hopefully as he fixed his yellow eyes on his mistress. Hermione always had a soft spot for her pets. Harry could tell that her will was wavering and that she would give in if Crookshanks could prod her gently in the right direction. We could always look out for each other. Crookshanks added.

"Very well, Crookshanks." She relented with a warm smile on her face. "You better make sure that you stay safe." Hermione said firmly as she lowered the cat to the ground. Harry blinked when he suddenly felt a strange, faint feeling of joy that did not belong to Hermione or Hedwig. This feeling was different.

It couldn't be. Hermione had barely had the pet for a week. It wasn't enough time to create a familiar bond between them. The faint feelings faded away as soon as they came. Hermione left him to his thoughts as she went to the bathroom to clean up.

Harry realised that he needed Dobby to do several things for him. "Dobby, are you free?" Harry asked as he waited expectantly for that familiar 'crack' sound indicating his arrival.

Dobby promptly arrived beside him. Harry's emerald eyes had widened momentarily as he took in the changes his friend had undergone. He was wearing a fitting white shirt and black trousers. The Potter's crest could be seen prominently on the breast pocket of the shirt.

"How may I help you, my Lord?" Dobby asked in a solemn voice. Harry would not have recognised him if he did not noticed that familiar glint of excitement in his large round eyes. He must admit that Charles had indeed done a good job.

"Oh yes." Harry added absently when he realised that he was staring at Dobby blankly. "Would it be much of a bother to get more clothes for Luna and Hermione?" Harry asked.

“No, it’ll be no trouble at all. I’ll purchase some tomorrow.” Dobby grinned broadly.

“Thank you, Dobby. Also, can you please purchase a Nimbus 2001 for her? She needs a decent broom and I know she won’t like it if I spend a fortune on a Firebolt for her.” Harry added thoughtfully. “Are there any important letters that I need to go through today?”

“The finance statement and the report on the progress of all the companies you own are on your desk. There are several things that need your signature. We’ve received many offers of marriages from most noble families, too. I have drafted a suitable response but I need your approval.” Dobby answered. “Do you want to look over them now?” he asked hopefully.

Harry smiled at his enthusiasm. “Sure, Dobby. Please give me a moment to change into a more comfortable outfit, and I’ll be in the study shortly.”

Harry realised that ‘several things’ was the understatement of the century. The pile of letters that needed his signature was as high as him. He whistled at the sight of the documents that he had to acknowledge and read. There was another pile of files sitting on the desk and Harry reckoned it was probably the progress report for the companies the family had owned. Harry pulled up his sleeves of his long-sleeved shirt and got to work.

Harry knew that the Potter family had owned many magical and Muggle companies, but the exact number of it shocked him. Dobby gave a detailed overview of every single company that was on the list. The companies were generally managed well. He was glad that he could rely on Elissa’s teaching to aid him with such matters. Hermione had joined him after her shower to look over all the documents. They both agreed after much discussion that it was alright to leave the companies alone for the time being. They had to visit each company to make a more informed decision on the change of direction.

Harry and Hermione had gone through half of the stack before they retired for the night. Harry laughed when he saw the pillows that

Hedwig had promised. They were as comfortable as she had assured. The young couple stripped down to their underwear and climbed into their bed for the night.

“Good morning, Harry. Where’s Hermione?” Edmund asked as Harry walked past his portrait. Edmund was smiling genially when he saw Harry. Harry had decided to sneak into the House when he realised that Hermione had decided to spend some time teaching their friends.

“She’s back in the real world teaching our friends Occlumency. I think Hermione’s going to scream at me when she realised that I didn’t follow her schedule and sneaked into the House instead. I think I’m supposed to be exercising.” Harry answered sheepishly as he raked a hand through his messy black hair. Harry had a rude shock in the morning when he opened his eyes and saw a large board taking up the entire wall facing their bed. The shock soon faded into amusement when he realised that the board reflected the schedule for the day and the need-to-do list. He scanned through the schedule and realised that Hermione had planned their day by the hour, filling them with revisions, exercises and exams. They were going to have three exams later that day. Harry sat on a bed for a while to admire her wonderful runes and charms work. “I can only spend one real hour in here for today. Her birthday is around the corner, I needed the extra time to make it memorable for her.”

“You are seriously whipped.” Edmund commented with delight. “I know that both of you are very compatible to one another, but it really depends on the effort the two of you put into the love blossoming between you. I’ve only made it easier for the pair of you to be together.” Edmund chuckled brightly. “I can’t create the feeling of love between two individuals.”

Blood rushed into Harry’s cheeks and he lowered his head. “Hermione’s an amazing girl. Edmund, if you are the Creator, why are you confined to a portrait?” Harry stated inquisitively.

“It isn’t exactly me, Harry. I’m only here as an observer and not a participant of this upcoming war. For that reason, I appear as a portrait to give you advice.” Edmund answered plainly.

"Including cryptic messages?" Harry asked sardonically.

"You and Hermione read too much into it. This is general advice. I'm sure you must have learnt from your lessons that two people can form an alliance having one clear similar goal, but with different personal agendas. They might betray you if the time is right because they harbour their own motives. I'm sure that you have plenty of friends around you, some might be false and some might be real. I just wanted to warn you to be more alert to the snakes." Edmund explained.

Harry arched his eyebrows in disbelief. "I'm not going to argue with you, Edmund – I'm sure that you are entirely right. Anyway, I'd like to do some physical training with my sword as I brainstorm about what gift I'm getting for my wife. I also need to pick up books on wards. Hermione and I had discussed about warding her parent's house from possible attacks. I was thinking of warding the house sufficiently enough to give them time to portkey into safety. I don't want to ward the house too heavily because it would attract attention."

"Good luck. How much time do you need?" Edmund asked.

"I need about 3 hours. Ade, please help me adjust the time accordingly. Please inform me when my time is up." Harry answered. "See you later, Edmund." Harry continued as he trooped towards the training room to practice his skills using the Sword of Gryffindor.

The Sword of Gryffindor felt as if it was a part of him as he wielded it effortlessly. It seemed to be moving in accordance to his thoughts rather than his actions and he was astounded by the speed the sword could move in as it flowed from one form to another, parrying, slashing, thrusting and defending with his long broad sword against his sparring partner, armed with a short sword. Sounds of metal striking hard on each other echoed through the room as Harry parried those heavy blows easily and agilely. He had taken a defensive posture since the start of the battle. It was time for him to get aggressive. Harry took a step into his opponent's space and began his attack. His opponent was quickly forced into a defensive posture as he tried to parry every single attack of Harry. Harry's attacks only grew faster and more powerful with each contact of the swords. The

opponent was soon growing tired of the battle and Harry made use of the opportunity to deliver a sweep arc to knock his sword off his hand to the ground. Harry immediately pointed the sword to his opponent's throat. His opponent bowed in acknowledgment of his defeat.

"Good job, Harry. I'm glad you finally beat the sparring opponent. Bear in your mind that your opponent might use magic when you disarm his weapon. This is only level one; I want to see your swordsmanship improve." Toll commented from the side. "I am glad that now you have the foundation to wield a sword. I think you are still not ready to use weapons in real battles. Have a rest. I need to speak to your battle instructor."

"Yes, Toll." He answered as he slid his sword back into its scabbard. He wiped the perspiration on his brow and his body with a cloth as he hydrate himself. His muscles were aching from the vigorous workout but he felt a sense of achievement from that victory.

"Harry, it's almost time to leave for the real world. Have a shower the head back." Ade informed politely.

"Thanks, Ade." He grinned. Harry had thought of a nice gift for her and hurriedly wrote a list of things he needed to get before he returned to the real world. Good grief, Harry thought when he realised what he was doing. Being with Hermione does that to people, he thought in amusement as he shoved the list into his pocket and went for a quick shower. He decided to get all the parts required during the upcoming weekend.

Harry changed into his Hogwarts robe and went to the common room to meet the rest of them. "Good morning, Angel." He beamed as he kissed Hermione briefly on her lips. "How are they coming along?" He asked as he wrapped an arm around her petite frame as he watched his two friends meditate with their eyes shut.

There were tranquil expressions on their faces.

"Good morning, love. Not too bad. I'm feeling a little lost without getting any exercise this morning." Hermione answered as she

leaned into his hard chest as Harry idly played with her wavy brown tresses.

"Missing exercise for a day won't have any detrimental effects. You need a rest occasionally, dear." Harry responded fondly as he pressed a loving kiss on her forehead. "I saw the board this morning. It was really well done. I like the use of a sticking rune. Why didn't you wake me up to help you?" He asked as he mentally noted the use of that particular rune. It was going to be helpful.

Hermione merely shrugged casually. "I wanted everything to be neat and proper. We are taking so many subjects that it would definitely help if we get organised. You were so tired last night, so I let you sleep in." Hermione answered matter-of-factly.

"Thank you for everything." Harry whispered lovingly as he pressed his forehead on her and playfully rubbed her small nose with his. Her lips had curved upwards in amusement as she looked into his sparkling emerald eyes.

"Harry, you should really get a room. Think about the feelings of all the singles." Oliver Wood, captain of the Quidditch team teased as he approached him. The young couple merely smiled at him. "We're going to have tryouts this evening. We are playing against the 'Claws for our first match."

"Good morning, Wood." Harry greeted. "Mind if I leave early during the tryouts? I have lessons. By the way, when would practices start?" Harry asked, with an affectionate grin as he glanced at his wife. He spotted her taking out a parchment and casting some charms on it. He had no doubt that she was adjusting the schedule accordingly.

"I think it should be fine. Tryouts for seekers are usually pretty quick. You're getting a bit big to be a seeker, though. Practices are starting this week. We'll have our first practice on Saturday and have those three times a week after that. I was going to post the notice on the board." Wood responded.

"Great." Harry grinned. There was a glint in his eyes when he thought about having the chance to fly his broom. "I can't wait to start flying

again.” He missed flying on his Nimbus 2000.”I’ll see you this evening on the pitch, then.” Hermione was shaking her head in amusement.

“Congratulations, by the way.” Wood added with a warm smile on his face. “It is about time both of you got together. See you.” Wood said as he left the common room.

“Neville and Luna, it’s time for breakfast. The two of you can continue during your break times.” Hermione said as she tapped on their shoulders.

Both of them opened their eyes. “I can’t seem to find my centre though.” Neville confessed as he frowned in deep frustration.

“It takes time. It took me a while to calm my mind down.” Hermione answered sympathetically. Her answer made Harry snorted.

“You took a long time to find your centre, love. You were bothered that you couldn’t completely empty your mind at first,” Harry laughed as he recalled the times they were learning Occlumency. Harry was so distracted by Hermione’s racing mind that he also had a difficult time finding his centre but he had no problem creating a mental barrier between them because of this. Harry had set up a mental wall out of desperation to prevent her from distracting him. He found his centre right after that. Hermione did not want to talk to him for a day when she realised that Harry could pick up the basics of Occlumency easily.

Hermione narrowed her eyes into slits as she glared at her husband. “I can’t help it - my mind is a like the landscape of a bustling urban metropolis.” Harry playfully pulled her into his embrace. He knew what she was talking about because sometimes he could hear a swirl of thoughts instead of separate coherent thoughts when she was thinking deeply about things.

“I’m sorry, Angel. I can’t help it. You did eventually learn to slow down your thought processes and master it, though.” Harry grinned goofily. Hermione gently smacked his chest as her lips curved upwards slightly in amusement. Harry chuckled at her reaction. Hermione

ignored him and turned her attention to her friends as Harry recovered from his mirth.

"Nevertheless, both of you still managed to master it over the summer holidays. That's really fast." Neville interjected. His lowered his head in disappointment. Luna was tittering politely at their antics. Neville's statement sparked another round of laughter from Harry. Neville was staring at Harry with a befuddled expression on his face as he glanced at Hermione for an explanation. Hermione merely rolled her eyes. Harry and Hermione had actually taken about a year to master the skill.

"Neville, it's alright to take more time because you'll be busy with school work." Hermione said patiently. "How about you, Luna? Did you have difficulties in finding your centre?"

"I found my centre. I was about to lay my first brick when you tapped on my shoulder." She answered dreamily.

She had arched her eyebrows in disbelief. "Wow, that's very fast, Luna. Excellent job."

"You need a calm mind to find Gremles." Luna answered plainly. "We can all go Gremles hunting as soon as Neville finds his centre. They're very pretty." She added excitedly.

"I think it will take a while." Neville said despondently.

Luna placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "All in good time." She smiled warmly. "Did you say something about going down to the Great Hall for breakfast? We should head down now if you want to avoid the crowd."

"Uh, yes. Let's hurry. Would you like us to collect your things from your dorm after breakfast? After all, I think you might need some of your books for your lessons later." Harry asked as he glanced at the blonde girl. She nodded.

Breakfast was relatively peaceful for the four of them. Most of the students were still fixated on them, but no one approached them.

Hermione had learned to deal with the stares and the glances that were shot in her direction. Most of them were vindictive glares. She did not need to be a Master Legilimens to know that the girls were unhappy that she and Harry were together. The intensity of the glowers increased whenever Harry paid a lot of attention to her, which was almost all the time. Hermione suspected that Harry had noticed these angry looks and was doing his best to protect her in his own discreet manner. He never let her leave his sight or else he got Luna to accompany her to the places he couldn't go.

Hermione's guess was spot on. Harry was indeed not oblivious to the malicious glares that were being sent in the direction of his wife. He knew that she was perfectly capable of defending herself from any attacks stemming from jealousy. However, knowing this didn't stop him from wanting to look after her. Sure, Hermione might be amused for a while to see him getting so overprotective of her. He also had to be careful not to overdo it because that would be a sign of his disregard of her prowess. The last thing he wanted to do was to discount her abilities - Hermione was as good as he was in terms of skills, if not better to make up for her lack of sheer power. Harry made a promise to himself that if they should hurt Hermione in any way, he was going to make sure they were going to regret it, no matter what Hermione might think.

After breakfast, Harry, Hermione and Luna had headed to the Ravenclaw tower to retrieve her things. Harry had an ulterior purpose in accompanying her into the tower. Hedwig had joined them when they had reached the entrance of the Ravenclaw tower. She perched on his shoulder as they stood outside the entrance of the Ravenclaw tower.

Harry decided to make this a visit that they would never forget. Hermione and Luna had immediately backed away as soon as Harry took out his wand. He told the portrait to move away, and she complied immediately after sensing his intent. Harry blasted the entrance open with a powerful *reducto* spell revealing a common room bustling with Ravenclaws. It was just as Luna had said: almost all of the Ravenclaws were in the common room at this hour. Some were reading, studying, or just chatting with each other. A sea of

stunned faces greeted them as Harry scanned the room. The entire common room grew silent as they entered the room.

Hermione sealed the entrance of the common room by conjuring a wall. Harry knew that they wouldn't be bothered unless a teacher was called in. Using the most arrogant voice he could muster, Harry spoke. "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I'm sure I don't have to introduce myself and my companions. Please kindly return all that you have 'borrowed' from Luna 'secretly' back to her now and she will forgive you like always." Harry glanced around the room and noticed that some had snorted at his statement. "Otherwise, be prepared to face me. I'll give you five minutes to get her things and your time starts now." Harry added coolly as he checked his watch. After the display of power, the threat was evident in his tone and it made some Ravenclaws scurry upstairs to get her stuff. Harry made a show of playing with his wand as the Ravenclaws hurriedly placed Luna's things on the table near to him. There were assortment of things and the sight of the pile growing higher made Harry even angrier. Red sparks flew from the tip of the wand from his rage and it had frightened many of them. There was no Hermione at his side to calm his temper since she went with Luna upstairs to pack her stuff. He was sure that she'd approve if he decided to hex the entire house.

Bloody cowards. Hedwig hissed as she fixed her amber eyes on them. Picking on the weak.

The pile finally stopped growing. Harry glanced idly at the things. "Accio, Luna's stolen items." He spoke and more items flew to join the pile. The amount of things that the Ravenclaws had taken was astounding. He closed his eyes and willed himself to control his temper. He didn't want any accidental magic in the common room.

Hermione and Luna had finally appeared with her trunk. Her brown orbs narrowed in anger when she saw the pile of stolen items. "Luna, could you point out the people who gave you the wrong password two nights ago?" Harry asked emotionlessly as he glanced around the room. Several people flinched at his tone. He opened the trunk with a flick of his wand and packed all her items neatly into it with another swish.

"Harry, I know you mean well. I don't want you to get in trouble on my behalf." Luna requested pleadingly.

Hermione snorted. "You nearly died two nights ago because of their bullying. They're the ones who should be punished. We won't let them harm you any further." Hermione promised as she glanced at Harry. Harry nodded.

"No one has a right to bully, Luna. You shouldn't think that you deserve it because you see the world differently. It's them, as narrow-minded as the rest of the Magical World, who are in the wrong." Harry growled. Sparks were ignited from his wand. There was a sudden blast and the wall blew apart with several well chosen spells.

Great, Harry thought in amusement. Professor Flitwick is here. Harry turned around to face the diminutive professor striding angrily into the room with another prefect. "Good morning, Professor Flitwick." Harry greeted politely as he levitate Luna's trunk.

"What is the meaning of this, Mr. Potter? The portrait told me that you blasted the entrance away." He snapped in his squeaky voice. Triumph expression were seen in the room as some Ravenclaws' faces as they thought that they would be saved from Harry Potter by the timely arrival of their Head of the house but they were wrong. They were about to decent into another hell.

Harry did not flinch from his tone. In fact, he had kept his face emotionless.

"The portrait didn't grant entrance to Miss Lovegood, Sir. Since we were in a big hurry, we blasted the entrance out of the way after warning the portrait. I'm glad that she is unharmed." Harry calmly explained. "I was about to hex the entire house when you arrived, Sir. They've been bullying Luna ever since she arrived at Hogwarts. In fact, she nearly died two days ago because of the nasty prank that they pulled on her again. If Hermione and I hadn't intervened, the House of the Ravenclaw would've been disgraced and held responsible for the death of fellow housemate."

Professor Flitwick was stunned by Harry's statement. "E-Explain all of this to me." He stammered in anger. The Professor glanced around the common room in fury. The sight of guilty faces enraged him further. His face was turning red. The Ravenclaws shuddered at the sight of their head of the house.

"Let me show you." Harry added smoothly. He pointed the wand to his head and cast a spell so that the memory of the encounter of the Dementors, the important snippets of the conversation in the Gryffindor common room, and the pile of stolen items they had recovered was projected on the wall.

Tension grew in the air as the Professor turned livid after watching the memory.

"Impressive work, I must say." Professor Flitwick commented even though he was still completely enraged. "A corporal Patronus at your age, amazing. Therefore, 200 points to Gryffindor for saving Miss Lovegood. I'm glad that you haven't taken their punishment into your own hands yet. I'll take over from here. Where are you taking Miss Lovegood's things?" Professor Flitwick asked.

"I don't think it is safe for Luna to stay here. She'll be living with me in my quarters." Hermione answered simply.

"Ahh, yes. I'd heard that you have your own quarters because you are involved with a project with Professor McGonagall. Although it would show poor mismanagement of Ravenclaw house on my part, I'll allow her to stay in your dorm for her safety. I'll get to the bottom of the entire matter and issue the appropriate punishment. " Professor Flitwick promised.

"Thank you, Professor. You wouldn't mind if I have my familiar to accompany Miss Lovegood whenever she goes?" Harry asked politely.

"I don't mean to insult since I've seen the prowess of your beautiful familiar. I think an enraged owl will be the least of their worries once I'm through with them. I wouldn't mind at all. Feel free to tell me if they attempt to bully Miss Lovegood again. I'm sorry for allowing this

happen to you, Miss Lovegood.” The minuscule professor added sadly.

“It’s alright, Professor.” Luna answered courteously as she lowered her head.

“We’ll fix the entrance and apologise to the portrait before we leave. Have a nice day, Professor.” Harry assured before going off to repair the entrance with magic. Hermione levitated Luna’s trunks and the trio left the Ravenclaws to the mercy of Professor Flitwick.

No one saw the Ravenclaws for the rest of the day. The Ravenclaws’ house points had reached an all-time low and wouldn’t be in competition with the other houses for the House Cup this year from all the deductions. Luna was called in to decide the fate of several students who were facing expulsion from school for their deeds. Luna had kind-heartedly forgiven them, much to Professor Flitwick’s disapproval; as a result, they only faced lifetime bans for Quidditch and permanent detentions. It was apparent that he wanted to correct the entire situation in his house. Thus, at least half of the Quidditch were unable to play because of the ban. The seeker, Cho Chang was made the new captain, being the most senior of the newly formed team.

The Ravenclaws had accepted their punishment grudgingly after Professor Dumbledore showed his approval for the punishment. The headmaster received a wind of the matter when he overheard the gossip. He checked with Professor Flitwick and found the rumours to be true. The next day, he made an example of this incident to warn all bullies in the school that that type of behaviour would not be tolerated. Any violators would face the same retribution and that anyone who reported such cases would be duly awarded. Professor Dumbledore had expanded the list to include verbal abuse as an act of bullying. There was a loud outcry coming from the House of Slytherin but it had died down in the manner of a week after many were punished.

Throughout the rest of the week, the couple hid in their quarters most of the time, preparing for their various examinations. When they went to the Great Hall for their meals with Luna and Neville, and occasionally, the Weasley Twins, no one had dared to bother them.

Everyone in school had heard how Harry Potter saved Luna from the Dementors, blasted the entrance of the Ravenclaw tower to get in, and fixed it back up after he had left. The number of cases of girls swooning had increased and the young couple made a point to avoid crowds until everything had died down for the girls' health. Hermione had looked as if she was going to murder someone if she spotted any more fan girls. There were even more evil glares from the Weasley family, save the twins, as they were propelled into limelight again for inciting the change. The young couple also noticed the disturbing absence of Ginny Weasley and had a bad feeling about the matter. They visited the Chamber of Secrets to retrieve the remains of the Basilisk and deposited them in the House. At the end of the week, Harry and Hermione were given the green light to take their O.W.L in secret after getting 'O's in all their subjects tested at O.W.L standard. They had promptly decided to drop the Divination and Muggle Studies subjects so that they could have a normal 3rd year time table.

The weekend soon came. After his morning Quidditch practice, Harry headed to the Ministry with Dobby. He was playing seeker to the team. Hermione could not come along, since she decided to stay at Hogwarts to help Neville catch up on his work. Dressed in a simple black robes with the Potter's crest, he strode into the Ministry building. His entrance had caught everyone's attentions, however, no one had stopped him when they saw the ring of the Head of Potters on his finger. The guards on duty had greeted him accordingly. Lord Potter was shown to the relevant department politely and was given the file on Sirius Black immediately upon his request. He retreated to a private room to read through the entire file and realised that all of the bodies were successfully put together except Pettigrew's body.

It confirmed their suspicions that Pettigrew was still alive. Harry snapped the records shut in anger. "Goddamn it," He growled.

Harry returned the file and hurried out of the Ministry. They had work to do as soon as he got back to Hogwarts. He needed to find the double-crosser to clear his god-father's name.

However, he had two more errands to take care of on his trip. First, he had to shop for all the things required for Hermione's birthday. He found a secure place and went into the House to put everything

together. When he came out, he asked Dobby to bring him to another place.

It was a lazy afternoon at Knightsdale, the Grangers were enjoying a cup of tea when they heard the doorbell ring.

"Who could it be at the door?" Jean asked as she answered the door. Her jaw had nearly touched the ground when she realised that it was a familiar raven-haired boy.

"Hi Mummy," Harry greeted with a warm smile. The look of surprise was replaced by a look of sheer joy when she engulfed him in a tight embrace. "Harry, it's wonderful to see you. Come on in." She turned around and shouted, "Dan, come down. Harry's here."

Harry smiled as he followed her into the sitting room. Harry smiled when he saw a vast space in the room. Dan had hurriedly joined them at the sitting room. A wide, warm smile was on his face when he saw Harry.

"Hi, Dad. How are you?" He asked respectfully. Harry was pleased to see that the older man was well. "I'm sorry that we haven't had much time to write. Our first week has been really crazy."

Dan beamed affably. "That's fine, son, we understand. I'm doing great. Is that the reason why Hermione isn't here today?" He asked with concern lacing his tone.

Harry smiled and shook his head. "No, I was allowed out from school to deal with family matters. I decided to take the chance to visit both of you and share my plans for Hermione's birthday with you." He took out a small box and enlarged it to the original size. He levitated a large mirror out of the trunk to the large empty wall in the sitting room. He used a sticking rune to install the mirror onto the wall. The Grangers were surprised by his action.

"This is a communication mirror. It's set to a private network so that we can communicate with each other." Harry smiled as he tapped his watch. "Grangers' residence." He spoke. The mirror began to glow, signalling an incoming call. "This is the button to press to pick up the

call.” Harry indicated as he pressed it. An image of his face had appeared on the wall mirror. “To end the call, just press the button again.” Harry instructed, demonstrating the use of the mirror. “I must warn you to never use this in front of other Non-magicals, though. There are strict laws pertaining to that. This way you can call us whenever you want.” Harry explained happily. “I had a watch made today for Hermione’s birthday.”

“That’s such a thoughtful gift for Hermione, Harry. Have you decided on what else you’re going to do for her?” Jean asked politely as she watched her son-in-law.

“I was thinking of celebrating it with family and friends.” Harry replied as he drew his hand through his raven hair.

Jean raised one of her eyebrows with disbelief at that statement and asked, “And?”

“You mean I should plan more than a surprise party?” Harry asked in confusion.

“You’ve been a perfect husband to Hermione in all aspects but this.” Jean answered as she gave a sigh. It was clear that Harry didn’t get it, as he furrowed his eyebrows in a frown. “I’ve got a question to ask you. Have you taken Hermione out for a date since the two of you got together?” Jean inquired patiently.

His mouth formed an ‘O’ as he recollected all his times with Hermione. They had been so busy learning and dealing with everything that is happening to them that it slipped out of his mind. He began to feel uneasy. The times that they had taken their mind off work and enjoyed themselves were when Dan and Jean took them out. Harry realised that he had no excuse since they had the House to take time off his back. He had been a dreadfully unromantic husband. The realisation hit him squarely on the head.

“I should plan a date just for us.” He concluded after an awkward pause. Hermione had never complained about the need to spend quality time together, doing nothing but enjoying themselves.

Dan looked at him sympathetically. "It takes a while to learn that."

Dates, he had never taken any girl out for a date before. He wasn't sure what they could do. "I'm a bit inexperienced in that field. What do you do when you go on dates?" Harry asked as his cheeks turned pink.

Dan raised his eyebrows in surprise. "It's just time to spend alone with her. You could take her to dinner for some quiet time together. It could be anything. It is all about setting aside quiet time to spend with her." Dan answered. "Do you need help in making reservations?"

"No, I think I've got it. Anyway, I'll contact both of you about the details of the surprise party. I've been away from Hermione long enough." He said as he checked his watch. "We will pop by as soon as we can sneak out of school. I know Hermione misses you. We just have a little problem getting out because of the precautions that are taken after a prisoner escaped from the Wizarding jail." Harry explained as he stood up.

"If it is too dangerous, you don't need to visit us." Jean added hurriedly.

"It'll be fine." Harry promised. "The prisoner is innocent. In fact, we're planning to clear his name. By the way, he is also my God-father. I'll introduce him to you when we've finally sorted everything out. The ones that we have to worry are the guards. I'm not planning to put Hermione in any danger if I can help it." Harry smiled.

"I'll call you as soon as I get back to Hogwarts. I'll need to install a similar mirror in our study. After that, you can contact us by speaking our names or the name of our school." Harry said before he called for Dobby. Dobby had appeared instantly. He gave Jean and Dan a hug before apparating back at Hogwarts.

Hermione was busy tutoring Neville on Potions in the Gryffindor common room when Harry arrived back at their quarters. His heart was overwhelmed with love as he stood in the distance and watched his wife patiently teaching Neville. He smiled in amusement as he watched His friend scratched his head furiously as she went through

the main points of the potion. His wife had been working very hard since she married him, he thought sadly, as he watched her unwearyingly going through the points again.

“Feeling guilty about not treating her well enough?” Luna asked suddenly when she appeared behind him.

Harry’s face turned slightly red as he lowered his head. “Was it that obvious?” Harry asked sheepishly.

The petite blonde girl nodded her head. “Sometimes, I think Hermione feels unloved despite of everything you do for her. It is what you would do for a friend. I think she works as hard as you so that she can spend more time with you.” Luna explained. The words got straight at him.

“I-I don’t kiss friends, Luna. I don’t have the cravings to touch friends too.” He stammered as his face turned redder. He never questioned her motive for working along with him since she was a workaholic.

“I know you love her. You do things for her but Hermione will feel love if you spend quality time with her. I know you spend a lot time studying and working together but not quiet time with each other.” Luna pointed it out.

Harry lowered his head. “I realize that now. I’m going to do something to change the situation.” He added solemnly as he headed for his wife.

Hermione was surprised when she felt a pair of arms wrapped around her shoulders affectionately. The familiar musky scent made her relax instantly. His warm breath on the shell of her ear had sent a tingling feeling down her body when he spoke. “Hi, love. Hard at work?” He whispered softly before placing an innocent kiss on the shell of her ear.

“H-Harry, y-you’re back.” She stammered as she turned her head to face him. She nervously tucked her bushy brown hair behind her ear. Her heart rate had spiked because of that simple gesture. “I-I was just helping Neville um... in-” She stumbled as she tensely gestured to

the Potion books lying in front of them. Harry chuckled lightly at her difficulty forming a coherent sentence and decided to help her.

“-Potions, I see.” Harry interjected with a warm smile. She nodded her head gingerly. “Neville, it is alright if I borrow Hermione for a while?” He asked as he lifted his head to face Neville. “I want some time with her.” Harry answered with a wide smile on his face.

“Sure, Harry. I think I’m fine with potions.” He smiled weakly. Hermione raised one of her eyebrows in disbelief.

“Are you sure you’ve got it?” Hermione asked as she looked at the chubby boy closely. The boy grew slightly nervous since he was at the end of her scrutinizing stare. It was obvious that Neville required more time with her.

“I still have a few things to do, too. Why don’t you spend another hour with him, Hermione? I’ll look for you later.” Harry suggested with a patient smile. Neville had relaxed considerably at his statement.

“Are sure you’re alright with it, Harry?” Hermione asked softly as she raised one of her eyebrows questioningly. He could sense her mild confusion. Harry caressed her porcelain fair cheeks lovingly as he looked deeply into her curious brown orbs.

Hermione had unconsciously held her breath as she was drawn to his startling green eyes.

“I’m fine, love.” He assured softly, as a sensual smile slowly spread across his face, sending her pulse racing at the sight of it. Harry deliberately broke the eye connection when he straightened himself and reverted to his normal self. She blinked in surprise at the sudden change. With a friendly smile on his face, he continued as if nothing had happened, “I need to change anyway. I’ll see you in an hour. Have fun.” Harry casually shrugged as he headed back to their quarters, leaving a befuddled Hermione behind with Neville.

A/N: Hi everyone, thank you for all your reviews. Thank you frustr8dwriter for the wonderful work. Well, I wouldn't be updating for

at least two weeks. Have a great week ahead. Please remember to tell me what do you think about the chapter!

Chapter 10

Beta-read by frustr8dwriter

"Hermione? Hermione?" Neville called as he furiously waved his hands in front of the brown-haired witch. "I'm finished with my essay." He received no reaction from the girl who was still staring blankly into space. He repeated the motion; and his determination was finally rewarded when Hermione blinked several times.

"I'm so sorry," She added sheepishly as she tucked a stray curl behind her ear and scanned the parchment closely. Her cheeks were pink with embarrassment when she realised that Neville had been trying to get her attention for a while. Her brown orbs widened when she realised that he had completed his essay on the potion. "You're done?"

A smile of amusement appeared on his chubby face when Neville heard that. "That's what I've been trying to tell you for the past few minutes." Neville grinned and looked thoughtfully at her. "You've been very distracted since Harry came by."

Hermione's cheeks grew red instantly. "I'm sorry. I just can't help thinking about his actions. It's just so different." She mumbled as she lowered her head.

The smile on his face grew larger as he raised his eyebrows. "I thought it was a good thing that he was so ... um ... affectionate with you." Neville answered as he scratched his head. "After all, the two of you are dating." Neville concluded as he peered at Hermione closely. "I mean it's not like you don't love each other. Anyway, I'm done for the day. Thank you for taking the time to teach me. I'm heading out - Luna asked me to join her for dinner later." He smiled as he rolled up his parchment and took his books. "Have fun on your date." He grinned as he headed up the stairs to the boys' dorm.

Harry was thinking about the strange conversation he had with his supposed nemesis as he walked through the long corridors of Hogwarts towards the Gryffindor Tower to pick Hermione up for their impromptu date. The conversations with Jean and Luna had opened

his eyes to the fact that couples needed some quiet time alone to strengthen their relationship. It made him realise that they had been too busy coping with Edmund's curriculum in the House, unravelling the mystery of his parents' betrayal, and dealing with day to day activities at Hogwarts to go out and have a proper date. Jean and Luna's insights made him determined to correct his flaws as a lover.

He frowned as he continued to mull over the peculiar incident that took place when he was near the lake.

Harry had planned to help her unwind by having a quiet dinner by the lake. When he went to the lake earlier in the day to find a perfect spot, he ran into his rival, Draco Malfoy. He was so engrossed with his desire to make their date memorable that he did not notice the pale boy until he spoke to him.

"Hey Scarhead. Excellent work on Weasel, I bet you understand why some people aren't worth to be friends with." Draco drawled haughtily.

Harry spun around to face the pale boy. Malfoy's complexion was as pale as ever and his long blonde hair was plastered slickly to his crown, highlighting his facial features. Malfoy was one of the better looking guys of their year, promising to grow into stunning young man in the near future. Even now, Harry knew that there were plenty of Slytherin girls that were drooling over him because of his status in the Magical Society and his good looks. Harry found that Draco was standing behind him alone, without his usual burly guards. There was the usual haughtiness in his demeanour, but it was the clear absence of loathing in his tone that shocked Harry. He realised that Malfoy was making reference to their first official meeting in Hogwarts during their first year. Malfoy had scorned Ron, deeming him to be "unworthy of being friends with" and offering to help him out with the right connections. Harry frowned at the thought. Did Malfoy know it then?

"How did you know that he was unworthy?" Harry asked suspiciously as he peered at him. Malfoy merely shrugged nonchalantly.

"He had a calculating kind of look. He was looking around, gauging how much attention he was getting from being around you as soon as

I told everyone you were Harry Potter. Besides, he is the offspring of that woman.” He drawled. “I tried to help you but you stupidly decided to make friends with him and embarrass me in front of everyone.” He pointed out with mild hostility.

Harry’s emerald eyes narrowed at how petty Draco was. It was obvious he was still nursing a grudge for what happened a long time ago. Yet, it made sense since Draco had such an inflated ego. “So why are you talking to me now?” Harry asked suspiciously. After the recent events, Draco Malfoy having a civil conversation with him was the last thing he expected.

“You did quite a good job, really. It delights my heart to see the Weasels being humiliated in front of all of Hogwarts.” He added with an evil smirk. “Well, I also wanted to rub some salt your wound, Scarhead. I told you so. Now that I’ve achieved my goals, I’m heading indoors. By the way, if you’re thinking about finding a spot to have dinner with Granger, pick that one.” He added smugly as he pointed to spot with a lone tree standing near the lake. “I usually see Granger sitting under the spot alone, thinking.” With that abrupt statement, the pale boy turned around and began to make his way back to the castle.

Draco certainly did achieve his goals with an added bonus: it stung to know that Malfoy knew something about his wife that he didn’t know. Harry had no idea that Hermione liked that spot. Harry recollected about the incidences when Hermione had encountered Malfoy. The reputed “cool-guy-around-girls” loved to tease her mercilessly and seemed to pay more attention to her than to other girls. However, the thing that really bothered him was the apparent diminishing of Malfoy’s animosity. Harry was confused. It seemed to him that Malfoy really disliked the Weasleys and because of his association with them, the loathing was extended to him.

“Wait!” Harry called after him. Draco halted his steps, but did not turn around. “I’m sorry for embarrassing you back then. I realize now that it was uncalled for.” Harry added sincerely. The blonde boy did not answer and simply continued his walk towards the Castle.

She was sitting all alone, by the fireplace, idly flipping the pages of her book as if she was distracted by something. Long, wavy brown

hair was cascading down the side of her face as she stared at the page. Hermione idly tucked some of the stray locks behind her ear as she adjusted her position, uncrossing and crossing her long slender legs as she shifted in the seat.

The absence of people in the common room gave Harry the opportunity to appreciate the breathtaking sight from the entrance. He was enchanted by the way the light seemed to illuminate the different planes of her slightly angular face. The warm glow of the flames highlighted the long, dark, curly eyelashes along her almond brown eyes, her adorable little nose, her cheekbones, and sensual lips. Her trim, dark eyebrows had knitted together into a frown as she concentrated on the page she was reading. The intensity of her eyes were so captivating, Harry nearly forgot to breathe. He had to tear his eyes from that particular feature to fully enjoy the sight of her. He could see the subtle hints of her stunning athletic body through the loose uniform. Hermione was only wearing the blouse, the school skirt and the Gryffindor tie. She had the curves in all the right places and his pulse raced as he recalled how she'd felt when he touched her. It was her long slim legs that had his attention. She had such shapely legs that she took his breath away. He cleared his voice nervously as he felt blood rushing south. He didn't want the day to end before their date had even begun. He broke out of his trance when his wife snapped the book shut with mild impatience and placed it on the table next to her.

Her dull chocolate orbs had lit up instantly with exhilaration when she saw him. Harry arched his eyebrows in amusement when he felt the underlying tone of playfulness as she took a step closer to him. Hermione was so close that Harry could breathe in her wonderfully familiar scent.

"I thought you'd still be teaching Neville when I came in. I hope I wasn't the reason you ended lesson with Neville early." Harry smiled as he wrapped his arms around her small waist tightly and nuzzled her exposed neck tenderly. Her intoxicating vanilla scent was driving him nuts with passion as he took in the fragrance. He gently laid a short trail of kisses from her neck down to her collar before tearing his mouth from her skin. His emerald gaze was full of love when he looked at her. She slowly loosened her tie as she smirked at him.

Harry realised that she never buttoned the button at her collar, so as she undid her tie, the top part of her blouse teasingly fell apart slowly, revealing her pale neck and defined collar bone. Her slightly parted lips, combined with that intense confident look and the creamy exposed flesh, made his blood boil with passion. Harry had to control the animalistic groan that wanted to escape from his lips as he stared at his wife. He swallowed visibly when she leaned closer to him.

Forget being a gentleman. Harry thought as he took her lips in a hungry kiss that conveyed his need for her. His initial plan was put on the back burner as he gave into his yearning for his wife. She responded hungrily in return, tangling her long slender fingers into his raven black hair as they kissed. Harry moaned passionately when he felt her body intimately pressed against him.

“Not here.” Harry whispered breathlessly as he tore his face from hers. His arms were still wrapped around her waist and their bodies were still intimately pressed together. They could feel the erratic heaving of their chests as they searched each other’s faces. Harry’s eyes were a darkened jade as he looked into Hermione’s inviting brown ones. Hermione could feel his strong possessiveness over her. It was too private to allow others to have a glimpse of it. Hermione’s cheeks had turned slightly red when she felt the physical evidence of his desire. Harry moaned when her lust fuelled the passion raging in his blood.

Harry lifted her up against him, using one of his hands to wrap her legs around his torso as he supported her body with the other. Hermione was looking down at him with the most incredibly sexy expression he’d ever seen on her face as he carried towards the entrance of their quarters. He ardently trailed kisses down the side of her neck, alternating brief kisses and small nips as he caressed her silky smooth leg. The grip around his waist increased as she moaned in pleasure. Waves after waves of sensation jolted her senses at the magic of his lips. It was further amplified by their emotional bond; she was experiencing the sensations of his kiss and feeling Harry’s own excitement and pleasure. The stone lion leapt hurriedly away and Harry immediately walked them in. The moment the stone lion leapt

back to place, his mouth met hers with a fervent need. He did not even have the will to carry her into the sitting room.

"It's my turn," Harry whispered breathlessly into her ear when she slid down his body to her feet. He cornered her to the wall, lifted her skirt, and slid his hands up her creamy thighs. His hands were on the top of her knickers as soon as her feet touched the ground. He quickly pulled the knickers down to her ankles and discarded them. "Just relax, my love." He said as he looked at his wife. "I'm returning the favour." He said as he bent his head down and focused on his new task.

"That was incredible!" Hermione whispered breathlessly as she leaned into his embrace and pressed a tender kiss on his ear lobe. "Did you feel that way that night?" She asked curiously as she looked at Harry. Harry was smiling brightly.

"No – I think this felt even better." He answered as he gently caressed her wet brown tresses. The emotional link they shared fuelled them to reach the peak of the passion together quickly. Harry did not have the words to describe the experience. He felt, watched, and heard her reach her climax slowly. The experience spurred his own passion and he had to restrain himself from climaxing before she did. It was simply magical!

They continued to sit on the cold ground after they were properly dressed. "I'm glad you are feeling so relaxed." He muttered lovingly as he nuzzled her pale neck.

Hermione simply wrapped her arms around his body and laid her head on his shoulder. Harry tenderly held her close to him and they remained in that posture in silence for a long while until a thought came into Hermione's mind.

"How was your trip to the Ministry?" She asked with deep concern, shattering the serenity of the moment.

"Let's not get into that now. This evening is all about you and me. Everything else can wait till tomorrow." He added quietly as he held her closer to him. He could feel her pleasure at his statement. Indeed,

Hermione loved spending quality time alone with him. Her contentment delighted him immensely. "Are you hungry? Do you want to go down for dinner?" Harry asked affectionately as he tucked a brown lock behind her ear caringly. It was getting late and she was starting to get hungry, but Hermione stubbornly shook her head because she didn't want their quiet time to end here. Her response made him smile. "I wasn't thinking about having dinner in the Great Hall tonight. Let's do something different, just you and me." Harry assured with a warm smile.

Hermione didn't want to move but with the promise in Harry's eyes, she nodded her head in agreement.

Her brown orbs had widened in surprise as Harry led her towards the lake. Right under the lone tree standing next to the Great Lake, was a mat and a picnic basket. She covered her mouth with her hand in astonishment and looked to Harry for an answer. He tucked his hands into his pocket as he watched with great fascination as emotions played out on her face. The look of surprise on her face faded away and was replaced by joy and interest. He must admit that he was not at all surprised that Hermione had fell in love with this particular spot since it offered such a spectacular view of the lake and the majestic Hogwarts Castle. However, in his opinion, the view was incomparable to the sight of unadulterated joy on Hermione's face. It was a sight that constantly captivated his soul and had a profound effect of lifting his spirits.

"How did you know?" Hermione asked emotionally as she searched his emerald gaze. "I don't think I've ever told you that this was my favourite spot."

"Someone clued me in." He admitted honestly. "I was trying to look for a nice spot to have a quiet dinner with you when someone made a suggestion." He answered as he led her to the mat. Hermione obediently followed and sat on the mat. She knitted her dark eyebrows in disbelief. Harry shook his head in amusement. "You may not realize this, but people do pay attention to you simply because of who you are." He smiled as he brought the basket closer. "I didn't have the time to do anything, so I went to the kitchen to nick some

food for us.” He grinned as he settled next to her on the mat and took the food out of the basket.

“Well, I’m amazed that you’d take this person’s suggestion calmly. From your manner of speech, it’s obvious that this person has been paying close attention to me.” Her cheeks reddened slightly at her deduction.

“I’m not at all shocked that you have secret admirers.” Harry added with a smile. “I’m just glad that I had the chance to tie you down first.” He grinned mischievously as he handed her the cutlery.

Hermione laughed in amusement as she took them. She took a good look at the spread of mouth-watering food on the ground. They tucked in together. Both of them decided to talk about their years in Hogwarts as they ate. Even though they were together most of the time, it was a happy surprise that they could still share plenty of new things with each other.

“I used spend my time reading in the common room or the library whenever I wasn’t with you. I don’t really have any close friends other than you, Harry.” She admitted simply when he’d asked about what she did when they weren’t together. “What about you?”

“Well, you know that I’d play an occasional game of Wizard Chess. When I lived in the dorms, I used to horse around with my dorm mates, chat with them about Quidditch, or listen to them talking about girls. They always used to tease me since I didn’t have any particular interest in girls back then.” He answered as he finished his meal and wiped his mouth with a napkin. He put all the used cutlery and empty plates back into the basket.

Her eyebrows were arched in surprise. “You mean guys talk to each other about girls? What did they say?”

Harry’s face turned slightly red. “Well, it was usually things that guys noticed about girls. The older guys like to share their experiences.” He answered as he raked his hand through his messy black hair in embarrassment.

"Oh." She said as she blushed.

"Well, I'm glad that I'm spared from that due to our new living arrangements." Harry smiled as he folded his arms behind his head and leaned on the tree. Harry extended one of his hands to Hermione and she joined him, snuggling up to his chest as he wrapped his arms around her. "Angel, what made you befriend us during first year? We weren't very nice to you in the beginning."

"It was the incident with the Troll, of course. I think it was the first time a boy noticed my absence, hunted for me, then leapt to my defence, instead of leaving me in the lurch. Not every boy would do that for a person he barely knew. Even as I think about it now, I still feel that it was really incredibly reckless of you to jump on that Mountain Troll." Hermione confessed. "Yet, it was then when I started to like you." Hermione admitted honestly as they watched the spectacular scene of a lighted up Hogwarts castle against the dark night sky.

"I didn't know that you've felt that way for so long. I honestly think I started to like you from the moment I first met you on the Hogwarts Express. Darling, you came to my compartment because you were helping someone you barely knew search for his pet. I think I was really captivated by you even then." Harry added truthfully.

"Really, from the first time you met me?" Hermione whispered in a strange voice as she turned around and looked intently at him.

Harry gently caressed her alabaster cheeks with the back of his hand.

"From the first moment I met you." Looking straight into her eyes, he confirmed earnestly.

Moved by the moment, Hermione leaned in and tenderly pressed her lips onto his. Their lips fused together in a sweet affectionate kiss that conveyed their growing love for each other as they embraced. After awhile, they broke apart and Hermione was content to just remain in his arms quietly.

There was no need for words as both of them held the other close and enjoyed the serenity of the moment.

Hedwig hadn't stayed at the Owlery ever since Harry began his new sleeping arrangement. Her preference to live elsewhere was not due to the chauvinist male owls living at the Owlery, but rather her need to watch over her masters and her friends. She had taken a liking to the frail blonde Ravenclaw and Hermione's pet, Crookshanks. She decided to fly back for a brief visit so that she could catch up with her female friends. The sight of another snowy owl sleeping at her usual stand ruffled her feathers. Her tongue clicked in annoyance. The owl was whiter than her, indicating that it was a male owl. She flew impatiently to the stand.

"Why are you resting on my stand?" Hedwig hooted angrily as she fixed her large amber eyes on the offending owl.

The owl slowly lowered his white wings to reveal a pair of large bright yellow eyes. He fixed his eyes on Hedwig for a brief moment. "I don't think that your name on this stand, Miss." He answered plainly as he stretched his large wings. Hedwig had noticed that one of his wings was in the process of healing. "In any case, it was the only stand left unused when I flew in several days ago and I've been using it ever since."

Her anger waned when he compromised and hopped to the side so that she had some space on the stand. She quietly joined him. "How did you injure your wing? That wound looks pretty nasty."

"Nasty is the right word to use. It was fortunate that I was saved by my current owner." He hooted as he hopped to the water dish for a drink of water.

"You've had a recent change of owners then?" She deduced. She never heard or read of owls that changed owners because of their loyalty to them.

"Brilliant deduction skills, I must admit. Yes, I had a change of owner. To thank her for saving my life, I became her pet. She understood what I meant when I refused to leave and she's kept me ever since. I know it's unheard of, but previously, I was a Hogwarts owl," he explained.

Hedwig hooted in acknowledgment. It made more sense to her now. "My name is Hedwig."

"I'm Callan." He answered simply. "It's my pleasure to meet you." He said as he lowered his head in an unmistakable bow.

"Oh? The pleasure is mine." She hooted happily.

He shot a side glance at his unusually silent wife as they approached their quarters and saw the dread in her face. The sitting room rapidly came into view. It was only lit up by the roaring flames in the fireplace. He nodded his head when he walked to the huge space near the overstuffed armchairs. There was a fleeting shadow of a cat racing across the wall. All of a sudden, soft music began to fill the sitting room.

She spun around and stared at her husband in surprise. There was a mischievous smile on his lips as their eyes met. She held back a grin as Harry approached her slowly. His emerald eyes sparkled with playfulness as he stood in front of her. She remembered this scene vividly and her lips curved upwards with anticipation.

He placed his right arm over his chest and performed a curt bow before extending his hand to her. The expectant brown eyes met excited emerald ones. "May I have this dance?" he asked. Hermione arched her eyebrow in amusement but she elegantly placed her hand on his.

He affectionately clasped her hand and lifted it to his lips while maintaining eye contact. Hermione's heart could not help but flutter at his chivalrous gesture. His smile widened when he felt her pleasure at being treated like a lady. He silently led her to the centre of the room and placed his free hand on her small waist as she placed her other hand on his shoulders. Harry began their dance by taking a step backwards as she followed his lead. The hours they spent in the House taking dance lessons really paid off because they looked perfect together. Harry was no longer hesitant in his dancing and was capable of leading his partner. Hermione followed willingly.

They waltzed gracefully around the sitting room. His heart was captivated by the sight of her gliding so elegantly in his arms. Their eyes were constantly locked on each other as they moved in sync.

“Did you really think I’d let our day end so soon?” He asked in amusement as he supported her in a graceful dip. Hermione beamed at him happily as she continued to follow his lead and relaxed in his arms. He carefully helped her back into the position and continued to dance around the room. Harry was now a lithe and confident dancer, managing to introduce more complex variations to their dance and delighting Hermione greatly. Harry was excited to try all the complicated steps and she was tickled at how determined and ecstatic he was. When the music switched to a slow jazz, Hermione was content to wrap her arms around his neck and sway in sync with Harry to the beat. Their bodies were intimately pressed together as they swayed. She let out a satisfied sigh as she laid her head on his chest.

“Do you remember our first dance?” Hermione asked quietly as she laid her head contently on his chest.

“Naturally - it was right after our wedding ceremony. You looked as if you were dying to dance so I mustered most of my courage and asked you.” He replied. “But now, I’m ready to dance with you every chance I get just so I can keep holding you in my arms.” He went on as he pressed a tender kiss on her forehead.

“Then don’t let go. I still think everything is so surreal.” She whispered.

“I never will,” he promised as he kissed her adorable nose. Hermione held his face when he tried to move away and leaned in to kiss his lips fervently. He swept her into his arms and carried her to their bedroom. “I love you.” He added in between kisses.

“I love you too, Harry.” She answered passionately as their eyes remained locked on each other.

As the couple entered the room, Crookshanks walked quietly to the CD player that Harry had charmed to be tapped on magically and switched it off with one of his front paws. He took the disc player with

his mouth and carried it back to the table. Crookshanks had agreed immediately when Harry asked him for help. He was glad that everything was going very well for his masters. It was time for bed, so he leapt gracefully off the table and trotted to his basket. He climbed into it and fell into a deep slumber.

Meanwhile in the Headmaster's office, Dumbledore was thinking deeply in his large armchair. The previous Headmasters in the portraits in the office were all asleep, leaving the current Headmaster alone with his thoughts. The news he heard troubled his mind greatly. Harry Potter had requested permission from Professor McGonagall to leave the school grounds for some family business. It was not difficult to determine where he went. Some of his contacts in the Ministry had reported that the new Lord Potter made inquiries into the cases related to the Potter's betrayal, and more importantly, the case of Sirius Black. He slumped into his chair, feeling the weight of the world in his shoulders. He had a feeling that it wouldn't be long before Harry found out the truth of the matter. The wizard with the long silver beard stood up and began to pace around his office uneasily. He didn't want the truth to be discovered by anyone. He wasn't going to let all the prestige that he had received from all his work to go down the drain. He was no longer going to be passive - he needed to take action to ensure that Harry Potter remained his faithful pawn.

"I can safely assume that from the way you've been smiling all morning that your date went very well last night." Luna commented as she looked at the glowing Hermione. Her long brown bushy hair was tied up into a neat bun, highlighting the gradual angle of her jaws. She had lost most of her baby fat recently, giving her face a slightly pointy look. She was looking unusually happy this particular morning and was grinning like a Cheshire cat, naturally catching the attention of her friend Luna. Hermione's cheeks turned pink before she gave a brief nod and looked away.

They were in the Gryffindor common room, practising Occlumency. It became such a normal occurrence that no one thought it unusual to see Luna and Neville mediating in the common room early in the morning before breakfast.

The frail-looking blonde smiled. "I'm happy for you." Luna answered cheerfully as she clapped on her shoulders. She cast a glance at the chubby boy sitting next to her. His face was still screwed up in concentration as he tried to find his centre. Luna had finished laying the foundation of the wall. "Neville told me that Harry was taking you out, just in case you are wondering how I knew. It is good that you are going out on dates. Where did Harry go yesterday? When I saw him in the evening, he was wearing formal robes with the Potter crest on it."

"He went to the Ministry to deal with some family matters. I haven't had the chance to get the details from him. We'll have to wait for him to come down. I think he'll tell us what happened during breakfast." Hermione replied as she picked up her Transfiguration textbook and casually flipped through the pages. Harry and Hermione were going to join their fellow third years for classes starting that morning and she wanted to make sure that she hadn't forgotten the basic concepts.

"Where did Harry take you?" Luna enquired as she looked at Hermione with her dreamy blue eyes.

"He brought me to the lake for dinner and we spent our time chatting." Hermione answered as she smiled giddily. She began to twirl one of her brown locks absently around her fingers as she became lost in her thoughts. Luna smiled at her dazed expression as Hermione went on. "I couldn't believe my ears when Harry said that he began liking me from the first time we met! I only started liking him after Halloween our first year."

"He must've seen something in you that day, the same way you saw something in him during Halloween." Luna pointed out.

"I know, isn't that wonderful?" Hermione smiled contentedly and glanced at Neville. He was still concentrating hard in his meditating. I wonder what Harry's doing in the House right now. She thought absently. She knew that he was going to the House to practice his skills on the sword. She would have gone him if she didn't to help Luna and Neville with their Occlumency lessons.

"Let me get this straight, Harry. You think that Hermione is comfortable with wielding a gun?" Toll asked as he arched one of his eyebrows in disbelief. "I don't belong to your Muggle world, but even I know it is illegal to carry a gun whenever you go. Besides, it's difficult to acquire one in here. It'll pose many problems since we've never really used one in the Magical Britain."

"I think we might find it in other countries." Harry suggested. "Are you really going to wait until Hermione finds the correct weapon before you start her weapons training?" He asked curiously.

"No, I'll probably teach her how to use the weapon that is most suited to her. It may not be the perfect weapon for her, but it's good to learn more skills." Toll replied simply. "I made some modifications on the weapons we have now. You're going back for your normal school lessons from today onwards, right?"

"Yes. I'm going to ask Edmund to resume some of our lessons as well. I think Hermione is dying to learn more." He grinned, fondly thinking about his wife.

"Everyone will be pleased to hear that." Toll answered with a smile. "I think it is about time you returned. Freshen up then leave for the real world. Give Edmund the schedule the next time you come in. I'll consider your idea."

"Thank you." He smiled as he bowed.

Harry, Hermione, Luna and Neville were sitting at the Gryffindor table having their first meal of the day. Hermione cast the spells to prevent anyone from noticing or overhearing them as they began their queries about Harry's visit to the Ministry the day before.

He began to explain to Luna and Neville about what happened to his parents. They were shocked to hear that Sirius Black, the prisoner who escaped, was his godfather.

"If the man standing in front of his wand isn't dead, it means that your godfather is probably innocent of all those charges." Neville deduced. "The supposed victim is then both the betrayer and the murderer."

Harry nodded. "Hermione and I came to the same conclusion. Professor McGonagall and Professor Lupin agreed. We feel that someone influential has kept my godfather in the jail for his own purpose. For that reason, I didn't want to spend too much time in the Ministry so I didn't really poke around." Harry answered.

"In another words, we have to search for the missing rat and your godfather secretly." Neville added as he glanced at Harry for affirmation. Harry nodded his head.

"You're right, Neville. I want to clear my godfather of all the charges. He is innocent." Harry added emphatically as he glanced around the table. "There isn't a lot we can do at this point besides finding the rat, appealing to Wizengamot to have his case tried, and finding a sanctuary for him in the meantime. McGonagall and Lupin will be helping me clear his name. I think the most important thing to do right now is to make sure he isn't caught." He declared as he scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"How are you going to find him? He might be moving around in his animagus form. You've never met him before, how are you going to identify him? Hogwarts is pretty large." Neville questioned.

Harry really had no answer. Hermione was nibbling on her lower lip thoughtfully as she tried to come up with some ideas. "Don't you have the Marauder's Map? It shows everyone here at Hogwarts on the map. We could take turns checking the map for Sirius Black's name." She suggested.

"That's a splendid idea, love." Harry added excitedly as he whipped out the parchment from his pocket. He tapped it with his wand, "I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good." He said. Luna and Neville watched in disbelief as the map of Hogwarts appeared right before their eyes. They noticed the small moving dots and noted that they were symbols of the people in Hogwarts.

"Wow." Neville said as he peered at the map closely. He could see Professor McGonagall in her office. "It's amazing. Who created it?"

"My father and his friends." Harry announced proudly. He didn't see Sirius' name on the map. "Mischief managed," he announced, before he tucking the map into his pocket. "My guess is that he won't reach Hogwarts any time soon. He was spotted quite a distance away about a week ago. Maybe he'll reach the grounds next week." Harry concluded. He looked at Hermione for affirmation.

"The guess is as good as mine, love. I think once Sirius reaches Hogwarts, we'll know." Hermione added and she placed her hand on his comfortingly.

"I don't like that we are waiting for him to come to us to react. In the meantime, he might get caught." Harry added in mild frustration.

"Harry, if he was able to escape from Azkaban then he'll be able travel to Hogwarts without getting caught. He'll make it here safely." Luna assured confidently. Hermione nodded her head in agreement.

We'll think of something, she thought. We'll have to go to the House tonight to think about it. We'll have more time there.

That's a splendid idea, Angel. We'll do that tonight after Quidditch practice. Wood called for extra practices again this week. Harry thought before addressing the matter at hand.

"You're right, Luna. We've more pressing things to think about." Harry added, "Like making sure that Gryffindor wins the Quidditch Cup this year." He added with a wide beam. Hermione had taken it as a cue to remove the spell as she shook her head in amusement. She never really understood the reason why Harry could get so fired up just talking about Quidditch. However, for a change, she participated in the conversation.

They began a discussion about Quidditch and the changes in the line up of players the other teams had made. Due to the recent upheaval, almost the entire Ravenclaw and Slytherin teams were changed and filled in with new students. They unanimously agreed that the Hufflepuffs would pose the biggest challenge to win the Quidditch cup and they were having a match against them the next week. Ravenclaw and Slytherin were not yet ready to play, as such

Gryffindor and Hufflepuff would be going against each other in the opening match of this season. Harry was really looking forward to playing Quidditch.

During the conversation, Ginny decided to join them.

“Good morning, Harry, Hermione, Luna, and Neville. It’s good to see you all again.” Ginny smiled as she waved at them warmly. “I hope you don’t mind me joining you?” Ginny asked as she looked at them. Harry peered at her and looked genuinely enthusiastic about sitting with them so Harry agreed.

“Please have a seat.” Harry offered politely. She quickly sat next to Harry, on his right.

They continued their discussion on Quidditch but soon the direction of the conversation began to change. Ginny was curious about Harry’s absence from lessons because her brother, Ron, had been harping on it. He had claimed that it was a sign of Dumbledore’s preference for Harry and his fame. Hermione rolled her eyes when she heard about this. She wasn’t surprised, though. It was typical of something she expected Ronald Weasley to say – words were out of his mouth before he even thought about what he was saying. Ginny didn’t seem to know that Hermione had missed her lessons along with Harry. Harry replied that he had to deal with some family matters.

“Oh?” She said as she lowered her head in disappointment.

Her expression did not go unnoticed by Neville and Luna. Being sensitive people, they hurriedly switched to another topic.

The group headed back to the Gryffindor Common room to pick up their books after they had finished with their meal.

Neville was grinning like a Cheshire cat as Harry and Hermione followed him to the first class of the day- Transfiguration. He missed having his friends with him during lessons so he was glad that Harry and Hermione would be joining them. Harry was mildly amused when he ‘heard’ all his wife’s thoughts racing rapidly. She had lowered her head and was occupied in recalling the principles of Transfiguration.

Since they are already at N.E.W.T level in Transfiguration, it would be a shock if they were unable to do third year work.

As usual, they were the first to reach the classroom. Professor McGonagall was glad to see them. "Good morning, Professor." They greeted as they entered.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, and Mr. Longbottom. It is good to see you in class this early." She returned.

"It's great that we have Transfiguration as our first class this year." Harry admitted before continuing. "I also wanted to give you an update. I've checked the Ministry's records. They managed to piece all the other twelve bodies but Pettigrew's body." He announced as a grim expression came over Professor McGonagall's face temporarily.

"Sirius is indeed innocent, then. We'll have to think of ways to appeal for a trial of his case. We'll speak of it in private this coming weekend." She added firmly and recomposed herself when she spotted students strolling in.

Harry, Hermione and Neville hurriedly went to sit in the front row. Hermione and Harry felt a mixture of emotions when they saw a certain redhead enter the classroom. It was the first time they'd seen each other since the incident in the Dining hall. Their eyes met for a brief moment. Despite all the words that Ron had said to him, Harry could find no place in his heart to hold a grudge. He had forgiven him almost immediately after watching Hedwig and Crookshanks punish him. After all, they had been good friends for two years. Ron did not avert his eyes or walk away; instead he walked towards them and joined them at the table. Hermione raised her eyebrows in astonishment when she saw that he had voluntarily joined them. Harry, however, kept his face void of any expression.

"Hi, is it alright if I join you?" he asked politely as he pointed to the seat. It was unlike Ron to be so courteous. Neville's eyes had widened in surprise as he nodded his head. Ron gave a polite smile and sat in the seat quietly as Professor McGonagall began to take the attendance of the class. It was strange that Ron would voluntarily sit with them when there were other seats available. Harry stared at

Hermione and she had shrugged her shoulders in response. It was a mystery that they soon forgot about when the lesson officially began. Before they started with the day's transfiguration, the students were briefed on how to perform the necessary spell to complete the task. Harry and Hermione were able to perform the task easily and turned to help Neville with his. Hermione noted that Ron was using a new wand as he tried to transfigure his porcupine into a pin cushion with no results. After his fifth failed attempt, Hermione's old habits kicked in. She moved over to help him.

"No, not that way, you're doing it incorrectly. Watch what I'm doing." She added after observing him for a while. Hermione demonstrated the actions of the wand and stressed on the pronunciation of the spell. Ron tried to mimic her and repeat the spell. Hermione took the time to correct his actions and his pronunciation. Finally, under her guidance, he managed to complete his task before the lesson ended.

"I want everyone to hand in a six-inch essay on today's lesson since most of you were unable to accomplish it easily. Class dismissed." Professor McGonagall announced as she turned away.

Harry, Hermione, and Neville hurriedly packed their things and left for their DADA lesson. Harry was eager to be taught by his father's friend. His excitement was also fuelled up by Neville's recollection of his interesting DADA lessons with Professor Lupin thus far.

"Wait up." Ron called as he dashed out the classroom with his Transfiguration book in his hand. His face was red with exertion when he had caught up with them along the corridor. Neville raised an eyebrow questioningly when he saw Ron joining them.

"I thought you didn't want to be Harry's side kick anymore?" Neville asked pointedly as he looked at Ron closely. "Have you changed your mind?" Ron's face turned as red as his hair as he grew uncomfortable.

He lowered his head. "I know I've been a git. I shouldn't have acted that way." Ron added as he glanced hopefully at Harry and Hermione. This was the closest one could get from Ron to a real apology.

Hermione glanced at Harry. You're the one that he offended. Do you want to forgive him?

There was the familiar twinkling of his emerald eyes when he looked at her. Hermione smiled in amusement back at him. I guess that he's been punished enough. Crookshanks' claws and Hedwig's talons are nothing to be messed with. She chuckled inwardly.

"I guess I should be glad that you've realised just how badly you've been behaving." Harry smiled as he clapped Ron on the back. "We'd better hurry if we want to reach Professor Lupin's class on time." They began running down the corridor to the classroom.

Professor Lupin's lesson was fascinating and Harry learned a lot about the creatures that hid in the lake and how to defend against them. He brought some Kappas in the tank into the classroom as specimens. Harry and Hermione enjoyed his lesson because Professor Lupin made it very light-hearted and entertaining. They had their most dreaded lesson after that-Potions.

The dungeon was as cold as he remembered as he entered the Potion room quietly. Most of the Gryffindors were already in the room since Professor Snape was inclined to deduct points for the slightest thing from anyone who wasn't from his house. Harry decided to sit with Neville for the lesson so that he could guide him. Hermione and Ron took the seats behind them.

When they finally settled down, the door was suddenly thrown open and Professor Snape strode quietly into the room in his usual black cloak billowing behind him. He walked down the aisle to his desk. There was the usual look of distaste when he saw Harry.

"Ah, I see that we have our resident celebrity back with us. Let's see if you are able to produce a proper potion after your break. Split up into pairs and start preparing this potion." Professor Snape announced as he began to scribble the ingredients of the potion on the board and the class began to copy them into their notebooks furiously.

“The finally product must be orange in colour. We are going to test Mr. Potter’s enlarging potion and see if it works at the end of the lesson. Frankly, I think they’ll be brewing to a ‘D’ with Longbottom as a partner. Why don’t you sit with your girlfriend? Maybe she can ensure that you do a passable one.” Professor Snape sneered as he stared at Harry coldly. The Slytherins in the class sniggered. Harry ignored him and began to prepare the potion.

He heard Hermione’s thoughts. I don’t think you should flaunt your new abilities. Just make a passable enlarging potion.

Harry frowned when he heard her agreed with her but it was against his own principles. Moreover, he was dying to see Professor Snape’s reaction.

I shouldn’t have sat with Neville. We’re his ‘favourite’ students. Neville will get picked on even more because we’re sitting together. Harry grumbled inwardly as he began to chop his ingredients finely as Neville watched in interest. Harry explained under his breath why certain things should be done in a certain way as he prepared the potion. Neville prepared at the same time as Harry. After an hour of brewing, Neville beamed when his potion was a thick, bright orange liquid. It was the way that Professor Snape had described it to be.

When he walked over to inspect the finished products, the smile on his face had vanished instantly. He took a ladle and scooped some of the potion to check its consistency and was shocked to realise that it was perfectly done. Harry and Neville were keeping a straight face as they waited for his judgement.

He threw the ladle into the cauldron. “Class dismissed. I want a 12-inch essay on the uses for the enlarging potion tomorrow before our lesson.” He snapped as he strode off, his black cloak swishing as he turned. The class had groaned when he left but Harry and Neville were grinning.

Hermione was smiling warmly at Harry and Neville when she joined them. “Didn’t I tell you not to show off? Why didn’t you listen?” She teased.

“Well, I did listen. You’ve always reminded me to do my best in everything. I’m just doing what you’ve said.” Harry smiled as he wrapped one of his arms around her shoulders tenderly. “I did what you normally do - I taught Neville.”

Hermione playfully smacked his arm away as she smiled. “I expect you to listen to me in the future, my love.” She added. Neville was laughing in amusement at the couple’s antics.

“Can we go for lunch? I’m famished.” Ron added from a corner when he noticed that Harry was flirting with Hermione.

“Let’s go - I’m pretty hungry as well. Luna should already be waiting for us.” Harry said as he took Hermione’s hand into his. He entwined their fingers together.

They had joined Luna for lunch at the Gryffindor table. Luna did not seem to be taken back by the sight of Ron but she did not seem to approve either. They shared a light conversation over lunch but Harry noticed that Neville had grown very withdrawn since they had accepted Ron back as a friend. A frown marred his brows as Neville was lost in his own thoughts. When Ron had excused himself to the loo, Harry took the opportunity to talk to him.

“Is something wrong? You haven’t said a word since Ron joined us.” Harry asked as he observed his friend looking very troubled.

“I don’t know if I’m just being oversensitive – so please don’t take this the wrong way.” Neville began honestly. “I really don’t think Ron can be trusted. Yesterday in class, he was still talking behind your back about the nasty stuff that you’ve done. I can’t believe that he’d have such a miraculous turnaround in just a day.” Neville answered in a disturbed voice.

“And I saw Ron Weasley with Professor Dumbledore in the Headmaster’s office when you showed us the map.” Luna added.

Hermione looked at him thoughtfully. “Ron is acting strange.” Hermione concluded.

Harry frowned at what he'd heard, but he understood Neville's concerns and was grateful that he was honest enough to share his concerns with them. "Thank you, Nev. I'm grateful that you are looking out for me. As far as trusting Ron again, we'll just have take a wait and see attitude," Harry added with a warm smile.

If Ron was indeed there on Dumbledore's instruction, he already had his answer - they were going to have to rely on themselves to prepare for the upcoming war. His wife had nodded in agreement upon hearing his thoughts. They just had to be careful about the things that they talked about whenever Ron was around. When they were done with their lunch, they headed to the library to catch up on their homework. Ron had excused himself from the group – he felt it was too early to begin studying and returned to the common room to relax.

They had difficulty trying to concentrate on their work because the girls sitting at the tables near them were giggling. Hermione was particularly bothered by them when she overheard what they were loudly whispering about.

Her face turned red immediately and she slammed her book down close, causing everyone to jump in alarm. When she ejected the wand into her hand, everyone around the table got worried. The girls sitting at the table next to them had also detected her murderous intent.

"Hermione, relax." Harry said soothingly as he tried to placate her.

She shot him a glare. "I'm not going to hex them." She cast a Notice-me-Not charm. "I wouldn't stoop to their level. However, I can tell you that they really admire you, Harry – quite graphically, in fact."

"What were they talking about?" Neville asked curiously.

"They were wondering how good Harry would be in bed and how he probably needs someone experienced to guide him on the pleasures of copulating." Hermione snapped. The raven-haired boy's cheeks turned red immediately.

“Leave them to their imaginations. You get to enjoy the real thing. Besides, I really don’t think Harry needs anyone to guide him in finding the right place to put his thing in.” Luna added offhandedly as she flipped through her textbook for the answer she needed for her essay. The other three flushed a deep crimson at Luna’s blunt words.

The lessons in the afternoon sped past quickly and soon it was approaching evening. Harry was grinning from ear to ear when he entered into the Quidditch Pitch with his faithful broom, a Nimbus 2000. The team had already taken to the air and was practicing flying when Harry arrived. Hermione, as usual, decided to come with him to practice and had taken a book along with her.

The practice was gruelling. Oliver Wood had wasted no time and was drilling them on the various strategies of play against the Hufflepuffs. Their new Captain, Cedric Diggory, had put together a strong team and was Gryffindor’s main obstacle to the Quidditch cup. Wood was only satisfied with them when he had made sure that every single player, besides Harry, was aching from the practice. The dirty and tired Gryffindor team trudged into the changing room for a quick shower.

The sun was beginning to go down when he came out of the changing room to meet Hermione. The setting sun painted the sky in a brilliant array of warm colours like orange, red, and pink. Hermione had come down from the pitch to meet him near the changing room.

“Since you’re here, I’d love to show you why I love flying so much.” Harry smiled as he swung his leg over his floating broomstick. “Please come with me.” Harry requested. Hermione gave him an unsure look. “I’ll never let anything happen to you.” Harry assured. Hermione reluctantly climbed behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist. “Hold on.” Harry whispered as he tilted the broomstick and accelerated. Her arms around him tightened considerably when they were climbing in height. They could feel the wind on their faces as they sped up wards then he changed the direction when they flew above the stands.

Love, isn’t this fun? In the air, you can do anything! Harry thought. He would have done a Wronski Feint if she hadn’t been afraid of heights

but he came up with a better idea. Harry sped straight towards the lake.

Hermione had temporarily forgotten about her fear of heights when she was presented with the picturesque sight of the lake in the evening sun. She was in awe as Harry made a trip around the lake. It looked even more spectacular from the air. Harry stopped the broom in mid-air so that they could bask in the splendour of the setting sun. Hermione laid her head on his shoulder as they committed the beautiful sight into their memories. They tenderly exchanged a kiss.

Hermione was rather impressed when Harry managed to land on his two feet as they arrived in the House. The glowing white runes had faded away as they fully materialised. Ade, being as considerate as before, had made sure that it was evening when they arrived. She was standing by the entrance, dressed in her usual toga, as she welcomed them graciously.

“Hi Ade - It’s so good to see you again. We wish to spend two days in here. Will that be alright?” Hermione asked as she looked at that face of ethereal feminine perfection. There was a warm smile on Ade’s face as she looked at them.

“It’s wonderful to see you as well, Hermione. I think Edmund might have some other plans for you.” She answered with a soft smile. “In your absence, he has been designing a proper programme of study for the both of you. The teachers are excited about the new projects they’ve thought of in order to train you better. He’s waiting for you.”

“Thank you, Ade. We’ll see him now.” Harry said as he bowed deeply.

Edmund was grinning from ear to ear when he saw them walking towards him. In his booming voice, he happily greeted them.

“We’ve decided to teach you how to apparate. I know it’s against the law to learn it now, however it will save a lot of time in here. Toll and El are anxious to coaching you on next process. They have come to a consensus that it is time for you to learn how to learn to use your weapons well. You’ll have your usual lessons in controlling your elemental magic, politics, and History. Elissa can’t wait to start

teaching the two of you again.” Edmund went on gleefully. “This is your new curriculum for the next real six months. You are expected to come in every two days and stay for at least a day.”

“It sounds as if there’s a lot to master in this real 6 months.” Harry commented.

“Are you kidding me? You’ve already been trained way beyond your third year curriculum. You aren’t learning much in your Hogwarts classes. You know that we must always make the best of the time we have. Besides, if you can’t master these new skills in these real 6 months, we’ll allow you more time.” He replied as he looked at Harry.

“Well, it all sounds exciting.” He answered with a smile as he looked at his wife. “Too bad we can only apparate in here.” Hermione was grinning back at him in amusement.

“I’m sure there will be more interesting things for you to discover tomorrow. Toll insisted on a morning run at five. So I suggest that the two of you get some sleep now. I’ll see you tomorrow for a short lesson. Good night.” Edmund said as he took the hat from his head and bowed.

They were finally back home.

A/N: Hi everyone. I'm sorry for the long wait. Well, thank you for all who reviewed. If I haven't replied your questions, I'll be doing it soon. Well, I get the feeling that the more I write, the less Harry and Hermione seem to be their age (13-14). Please continue to comment. Thank you in advance and I apologise if I don't get back to you. Have a great week ahead.

Chapter 11

Beta-read by frustr8dwriter

Newly-edited chapter

Sounds of metal clashing heavily on metal rang through the small simulated training room as Harry furiously fought with his opponent. He had cleared all the minions of his current enemy easily. They were knocked out when the blunt side of his sword connected with their armoured head. He was having a difficult time with this last one. Toll had specially picked an expert swordsman from the medieval times to test Harry's skills and wit as the final enemy for this battle. The room was made to stimulate a battle in a building, since it was unlikely that Harry would engage in battle in an open space.

In Harry's mind, it was a real battle for survival, especially since his opponent was bent on killing him. Light gleamed off the shiny Sword of Gryffindor as he parried the attack away with a hand. His muscles ached with the strain of holding his sword against the heavy blow. His enemy pressed into his advantage and his sword was getting dangerously near Harry's face. His muscles started to protest against the abuse as beads of perspiration began to roll off his brow. He was staring straight at Harry with a confident smirk on his face. Well, he had a reason to be cocky since Harry was obviously losing due to his lack of 's muscles began to quiver uncontrollably. He knew he could not hold out much longer, so he began to think of alternatives. A distraction, he thought, as he glanced at the roof. He recklessly summoned overhanging lights down on his opponent as he moved aside, allowing his enemy's sword to fall.

It worked. His enemy was momentarily distracted when he had hurriedly leapt away from harm after hearing the sound of the roof cracking. The overhead lights fell presently between them. Using this opportunity, Harry immediately moved to his opponent's personal space, swinging his sword overhead as he aimed for the opponent's head. He only realised at the last minute and hurriedly dodged away. The smile on his face had immediately wiped off when he realised how close his head was to his blade.

Pressing on his advantage, Harry quickly flicked his blade up, aiming to bring it down upon him. However, the enemy was faster than him. He side-stepped the attack and knocked the spectacles off his face with a heavy jab, causing Harry to stumble backwards.

Crap!

The room began to blur. The images started to change and re-shape. "Accio Spectacles." He said as he summoned his glasses to him. He wore them and looked up. After a while, the room had some resemblance to the training room Harry had grown accustomed to. Then everything became more solid and stopped shifting. He slid the Sword of Gryffindor back into its scabbard hastily as he walked out of the simulation room.

Harry wanted to kick himself for his carelessness. He hastily wiped the perspiration off his brow with his sleeve as he walked towards the bench that was against the side of the large training room. Toll had termed this as a light warm-up but he didn't find it easy at all. He had to admit that it was one of the most intense battles he had engaged in. Harry immediately took his soaked cotton shirt off his back and put it in the provided laundry basket sitting at the side of the bench. He sat down with his head between his knees in frustration.

Hermione quietly handed him a towel to clean himself up then sat beside him on the bench.

"I guess I need not say more about being careless. If it wasn't the third hit, you'd have died after he dealt the finishing blow. You do know that the side of your sword is blunt, why did you insist in flicking it against your opponent's armour?" Toll reprimanded as he offered Harry a bottle of water.

"I wanted to force him to back away from me," explained Harry. The Gryffindor sword was blunt on both sides, something that Harry was glad because he did not aim to kill his enemies. However if necessary, he could. The tip of the sword was still sharp and could pierce through thick armour. "However, I was impressed by your use of the environment at the last minute. This is something I need to see more

of from you, especially in circumstances where you are as unmatched as just now. His strength far exceed yours, it was stupid of you to engage the battle head-on. You might have been killed.” Toll evaluated as he looked at his notes. “I’m glad that you were quick enough to handle all four opponents at one time, but may I beseech you to be more patient? In addition to the two blows you took from them, you expended too much energy in sustaining a battle with them. You should always try to observe your opponents before leaping straight into battle and please try to isolate them so that you don’t waste so much energy. In a nutshell, don’t be so foolhardy.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.” Harry answered gravely as he nodded. Being reckless was one of his greatest flaws, something that his wife and his trainer had constantly reminded him of. Hermione placed a hand on his shoulder. Harry knew that he should be glad that it was only a practice session.

“Well Hermione, how do you like your new weapon?” Toll asked with mild excitement. The eager expression on their instructor’s face amused her. She drew out her new weapon from the small holster and presented it to Toll. A small shiny revolver lay on her palm. It was exactly the size of her palm.

The little baby resting in her hand was the fruit of all her instructors’ labour and their early birthday present to her. They had spend months researching and creating the gift.

“It feels as if it was a part of me. The best part was that when it discharged the bullets, it was silent.” She admitted as she held the gun. A frown marred her features. “I have only one problem though. The bullets it discharges went through the training target. Like Harry, I don’t intend to kill.”

A smile graced Toll’s face as he looked at Hermione. “We took that into consideration. The bullet is actually a transfiguration of a spell. It will transform back into a stunning spell when it touches flesh.”

“Really?” Hermione said as she quirked one of her eyebrows disbelievingly. “That is fantastic.

How did you managed turn a spell into a bullet? Can I alternatively charm the bullet with another spell? ” She asked as she stowed the revolver into her holster and it immediately turned invisible. Hermione was getting more fascinated with the gun and its bullets.

There was a grin on Toll’s face when he replied. “Yes, since it has a physical state. Alternatively, you can transfigure the spells you want to into bullets first before placing into the gun. This would be useful if you don’t have a large reserve of magical energy.”

Hermione’s eyes lit up. “In another words, I can spend time exploring the possibilities.” She concluded excitedly. “Do you have the blueprint?”

“Yes, I do. We can attempt to modify it. However, right now we have to move on to something more important. I’ll give you my evaluation of your shooting practice. You’re an accurate shot and would do very well as a sniper. I was very impressed. I’ll give you the choice to test your skills in a more practical situation. You can see for yourself how the bullets transform into a stunning spell when it touches flesh. Do you want that?”

There was a determined expression on her face as she looked at Toll. “Sure. Let me get ready.” She answered as she loaded her gun nimbly.

“The usual rules apply. Take three blows and the training session would be considered a failure.” Toll informed. She nodded her head.

The room had immediately faded and transformed into a room of a building. It was exactly the same simulation that Toll had put Harry through. Hermione hurriedly cast a disillusion spell as she sneaked to the side to observe the number of enemies she was facing. There were four of them and they were carrying melee weapons and patrolling around the room.

She began to formulate her plan. She knew that if she took one down, the others would be alerted and she would lose her advantage. However, there was no way she avoid alerting them. She aimed the revolver and fired, hitting one of the men standing closest to her. Toll

was right, the bullet transformed into a red light and the person was stunned. Before anyone could hear the sound of his body collapse on the floor, she blasted the roof with a powerful reducto spell to bring the overhead lights down, burying two more enemies. She took the opportunity and shot the last guy. Hermione was prepared to take a breather when she spotted the boss carefully treading in, with his sword in his hand.

The noise had attracted his attention and a quick survey of the room placed him on high alert. Hermione crouched as low as possible as she held her gun up. Despite being disillusioned, she could still be spotted if she moved because of the differences of the shade of the light. She held her breath as her enemy moved carefully around the room, searching for the intruder.

Upon closer observation, she realised that he was wearing armour. Hermione nibbled on her lip in contemplation. She wasn't sure if the bullet would be able to pierce through the armour he was wearing. From her position, she could not get a clear shot of his head. She had to wait patiently. Her target began to move through the room cautiously. When he lowered his sword to check on this dead follower, Hermione took the opportunity to shoot him on the head. The bullet immediately transformed into a red light and hit the enemy squarely.

The narrow corridor doors began to fade and transform back into the familiar training room. Hermione felt momentarily dizzy from the use of too much magic. Harry had to support her out of the room to the bench to rest as Toll gave her a potion to refresh her.

"Well, I don't think I need to say much." Toll said as he watched her drink the vial of potion. She instantly felt better. "Although you finished the mission, you were in no condition to make a successful getaway. You must always plan to get out of each situation successfully, instead of concentrating solely on finishing the mission. However, you did well. I liked the way you tried to pay attention to every detail and the good use of your environment."

"Thank you, Toll. By the way, if I had chosen to shoot my last opponent on his armour, would the bullet have gone through it?" Hermione asked curiously as she drank the bottle of water.

There was a mysterious smile tugging his lips. "Why don't you try it out?" He asked as he led the couple to a newly-built shooting range. There was a variety of materials as targets. "I believe he was wearing thick steel armour?" He questioned as he led them to the target made of steel.

Harry and Toll stood aside as she opened fire from a distance. There was a loud noise when the bullet deflected off the armour, leaving a huge crater in place, with a bullet wedged in the middle. Hermione smiled. If she had made the shot, her position and the weapon she was using would be revealed.

"Now do you understand why you failed, Harry?" Toll asked as he turned to look at Harry. Hermione was left to consider some possibilities she could try to modify her bullets. "If you were in Hermione's position, you would have made the fatal error."

Harry nodded. "I will be going over today's lessons again later. However, I do have a question to ask. Why do we need to learn this? Carrying a sword or a gun in public is against the law. In another words, we can't carry them to battle in the real world." He asked thoughtfully.

"You're right about the law. I'm sure you'll find a way to carry them around without being caught." Toll answered as he rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I don't think it is necessary to saddle you with too many combat skills. If you can master a weapon of your choice and hand-to-hand combat, you've graduated from my class. The objective of the lessons is to help the two of you to flow into any form easily, individually becoming versatile and powerful duellists, and together, a formidable team. This way you can stay alive. However, since you are both worn out from your training, it is better that we leave the lesson here until the next time. You've found out on your own that you can add your magic to your weapons to make them even more powerful. I'm sure you can think of other ways of becoming better duellists." Toll concluded as he shut his notebook. "I need you both to come in for at least two real hours every morning before your day starts to practice. This will make sure that you maintain your form and to help build your endurance. That's all from me for now. Edmund has

expressed his wish to meet with you after your training, so off to the showers you go. Please head over to see him as soon as you're done."

"Thank you, Toll. We'll see you tomorrow." They said as they bowed. Toll bowed in return and headed out of the training room.

Edmund was busy practising with his cutlass when the young couple came up and greeted him politely. A warm smile instantly appeared on his face when he saw them.

"Good morning, Harry and Hermione. It looks like you two just had a good workout." Edmund beamed warmly as he slid his blade back into his scabbard and sat on the chair. "You're looking more radiant than before, Hermione." He complimented.

There was a slight reddening of her cheeks as she lowered her head in embarrassment. "Thank you." She muttered. Harry merely smiled in amusement when he glanced at his wife.

"Yes, it was a tough session but we learned a lot from Toll today." Harry said as he summoned two armchairs for them to sit.

"Ah. Do you like your birthday present?" Edmund asked cordially as he glanced at Hermione.

"Definitely – it was perfect for me." Hermione smiled.

"I'm glad to hear that. We spent some time designing it especially for you. So, is there anything that you two wish to share with me?"

"Well, we feel that we might've one more person to deal with before we can have a go at Voldemort. He seems to be very insistent in making sure that we remain in his control and we don't see eye-to-eye with him. It's a shame, really, since he is a wealth of valuable information, being the leader of the Light."

Edmund frowned slightly. "It isn't good to be losing allies before the war even begins. However, if this is the case, you should expedite your entry into the political world so that he can't hinder you. He

sounds very manipulative, so he'll probably use all the influence he has to stop you."

"That's what I worried about when we realised that he might've sent someone to spy on us. I suspect that he's had a hand in the affair we are currently looking into now." Hermione added simply.

Edmund raised his brows in surprise. Harry decided to explain the whole issue with his godfather in detail to Edmund. He listened with great interest and only responded when Harry finished.

"That's interesting. Your godfather actually managed to escape from the Dementors." Edmund commented thoughtfully as he stroked his chin. "Since you both are thinking about finding him before the Ministry does, I'm guessing that you want to know if there is a way to track any Animagi that enter a certain compound?" Edmund concluded.

"Yes, is there is a way?" Harry asked.

"Oh, definitely. However, you will expend too much magical energy to create a detector strong enough to cover an area as large as Hogwarts. It's just not feasible. Besides, I'm sure that he will be safe until he reaches Hogwarts if he has managed to remain undetected for this long. I feel that you should be more concerned with providing him a safe place to hide and clearing his name."

"The Potter Mansion should be a good place for him to stay." Hermione stated. "Anyway, he was placed into Azkaban without a trial on the charge of killing a baker's dozen. The most important thing that we need to do is to influence the right people so that we can call for the case to be reopened."

"Well, it seems that it's important to accelerate the process of entering the Wizarding Society formally." Harry added solemnly as he scratched his chin. "I was planning on doing that much later."

Edmund chuckled. "It doesn't matter if you enter now or later. Everyone always has their eyes fixed on you because you are the

Boy-who-Lived. That is important. However, to clear your godfather's name, you need to find that rat."

Hermione nodded absently, already trying to mentally list the possibilities.

"Even though you have to do this, you'll have to find time to relax. You don't get to live your third year twice. Take the time to enjoy schooling." Edmund added as he shook his head. He knew how workaholic Harry and Hermione were. "I believe you were getting ambitious? You want to ward houses?" He asked.

"I've warded Hermione's family home with basic wards as a safety precaution. It was something that was weighing on Hermione's mind." He answered sheepishly. "Come to think of it, we do have a lot of projects. We haven't begun testing if familiars are able to tap on the magical reserve of their owners and use them. Hermione now wants to work on further modifying her weapon. "

"Harry, you forgot about the Basilisk skin. We haven't really decided on how we should use it." Hermione added as she flipped through her notebook.

He slapped his forehead. "How could I've forgotten? Well, we've a lot of skin. We could always make something for our friends. You forgot to mention your personal project to help our friends." Harry smiled as he looked at Hermione.

"Well, I thought you didn't know." She muttered as she looked away in embarrassment. "I don't feel comfortable not imparting useful knowledge to others."

Hermione turned to look at Harry when she felt his arm around her shoulder. A soft devoted smile was on his face. "It's one of the reasons why I'm so in love with you." He admitted honestly. Her heart melted when she saw only sincerity and adoration in his sparkling emerald eyes.

The sound of Edmund's good-natured chuckling reminded the couple that they had an audience. They hurriedly leapt apart in mortification.

His chuckling grew at the sight of the couple being so embarrassed. "Well, I'm glad that Harry adores you, Hermione. I'm happy that you're in love." He beamed happily. "I heard the use of a plural. Did you meet some new people?" He asked excitedly.

"We did. On the second day, we met a girl by the name of Luna Lovegood. She's now staying with us in our quarters. To date, we still have no idea how she knew that we were married before we even told her. There's been no problem having her move in. In fact, I thought it's worked out well - Hermione finally has a female friend to talk to." Harry smiled happily as he glanced at his wife.

Edmund arched his eyebrows in disbelief. "I thought you couldn't stomach the illogical?" He asked curiously as he peered at Hermione. He was certain that a person who prized intelligence and logic as much as Hermione would reject a person who was on the extreme opposite side of the spectrum.

"I think that some of Harry's personality has rubbed off me. I'm more tolerant." Hermione answered as she glanced at Harry. He had raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Well, it's one of the traits I love most about you." She replied as a light smile touched her lips.

Harry grinned back in amusement.

"I'm very happy that you two appreciate each other and are learning positive things from each other. Well, I can see that your week has been very exciting. Why didn't Hedwig come with you today? I miss her." Edmund asked.

"She found a good friend. The owl can read as well as she can. But we'll tell her that you missed her the next time we see her. It isn't very often that we see her lately. I guess that's the reason why Crookshanks has been spending most of his time out of our quarters."

"Crookshanks? You've gotten another pet?" Edmund questioned curiously.

"Oh yes. We bought him the day before we came to Hogwarts. He's a very intelligent and beautiful cat." Hermione answered excitedly as her eyes lighted up at the mention of her pet like all people who are infatuated with their pets.

"He is really a bright cat. He can even tell if an animal is an Animagus. Why, he told us that the rat that Ron keeps is a ..." Harry trailed off as he stared at Hermione with a shocked look. At that point everything just clicked.

"An Animagus!" She concluded excitedly when the realisation came upon her. A frown marred her face when her thoughts began to race. "Harry, you're probably right! There is a good chance that Scabbers is Pettigrew. He needed to keep his ear to the ground for news of Tom Riddle. What better way to do that by being the pet of a pure-blooded family whose patriarch works in the Ministry? The thing that scares me is the amount of information he has probably amassed on you over the past three years." Hermione responded as she bit her lips.

"I'm confused. Are you saying that you've found the betrayer?" Edmund asked as he looked intently at the couple. They just reminded him of the times when he'd developed headaches while speaking to couples with a soul bond. He could feel one coming on. "Harry, please explain." He said as he rubbed his temple.

"It's really simple. Crookshanks once shared with me that Ron Weasley's pet rat was an Animagus. Well, initially Hermione and I sort of decided that we wouldn't bother with that since he hadn't done anything harmful. It didn't dawn on me until we started talking about finding the rat just now. Everything just clicked. The rat that Sirius is probably looking for could be Ron's rat." Harry explained. "No matter, if he really is Pettigrew, we can clear Sirius's name!" Harry concluded. There was a gleam in his eyes as he looked at Edmund with determination. "It's time to put our training to the test."

His master and mistress were not in when he checked their bedroom, so he decided to try his hand at hunting in the forest. Hedwig had once mentioned that they tended to go out in the evenings and were gone for quite some time. The ginger-coloured cat prowled along the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest alone, searching for small animals

he could devour when he felt a pair of eyes watching him intently from the darkness. He lifted his head and peered into the darkness. A pair of big, intelligent, yellow eyes was staring back at him. He froze. He could tell it was a large creature and he didn't want to agitate it. After a while, there was a slight rustling of leaves and the creature disappeared into the darkness. What could it be? He thought as he peered into the darkness again. The growling of his stomach persuaded him to continue on his mission. He obeyed immediately and soon found several spiders under the bushes for starters.

"What do you mean that we're not allowed to provide any additional information on the war or training for Harry and Hermione? It's clear that You-Know-Who will be coming after them. Why aren't you allowing us to assist them in these areas?" Professor McGonagall demanded brusquely as she stared at the old man sitting in his large chair with her beady eyes. Her nostrils were white with rage. They were in the Headmaster's office discussing school matters. Dumbledore gave the instruction after she finished her verbal report.

Albus Dumbledore was not terrified of that famous Scottish temper of hers. He merely looked at her peacefully. "The faculty is merely discouraged to do so. First, Harry is too young for such a burden. I don't want him to be preoccupied by this entire business of destroying Voldemort. Moreover, we should not show favouritism on our parts, if you want to train him, then you also need to train the entire school."

"Are you out of your mind? What do you mean favouritism? You-Know-Who has chosen him. Do you think he would leave them alone?" She shrieked furiously as she glared at him.

"I believe that is the reason why we are all here. While Harry is still in this school, we are responsible for his safety. He can still have that few years of childhood. Yes, he has crossed roads with Voldemort by coincidence. You know that Harry wouldn't have met Voldemort if he wasn't so curious or reckless." Dumbledore answered calmly. He mildly surprised that she was close to screaming at him.

She took a deep breath and composed herself.

"The fact remains that we've slipped twice." The elder auburn hair lady declared in a clipped tone. "I'm sure we can all agree that up to now, it was fate that allowed Harry to cross path with him thrice. I'm uncertain if Harry will survive the next time we make a mistake. However, I am certain that he will meet Voldemort again. If Harry wants information on the previous war or requests additional training, I will provide it." She declared. "Good day." Professor McGonagall concluded as she spun around and strode out of the office, with her head held high.

Dumbledore stood up from his seat and paced around the room. It was evident that McGonagall was not convinced that his decision was correct. It didn't help that he was certain that Lupin would side with McGonagall and be against him. The other staff might also take McGonagall's side. Harry was fast becoming a big problem. He merely wanted to ensure that Harry succeeded in getting rid of Voldemort, and if need be, at the cost of his life. What are the lives of two teenagers compared to the millions who would be saved if Harry managed to stop him? Dumbledore could not see them succeeding without his input, which highlighted the other problem.

The company that Harry now kept may not be easily swayed by his words. He knew that it would be an obstacle in establishing his control over the young teenager. He once considered the alternative of using Legilimency on them to learn more about their plans and their mysterious tutor. However, it was clear from their previous conversation that he could no longer pick thoughts of their heads whenever he wished without alerting them of his actions. He could count on Hermione to help Harry take him up to court if he did that. A frown ceased his forehead.

"We need the information and expertise of people who experienced the war to prepare us." Dumbledore knew it also meant that they were prepared to do without if he chose not to help them. It led him to one conclusion. There was somebody training Harry and doing a great job out of it. After all, Hermione and Harry had easily passed all the preliminary test of all subjects to take their O.W.L.s. He needed more information on what they were up to. It was time to speak to his new friends.

Rays of the rising sun began to filter through the window into the large room as Harry and Hermione materialised soundlessly in their shared bedroom at Hogwarts, in front of Hermione's dresser where the Bottle stood. They waited for the white runes to fade before officially starting their day by changing into their school uniform. Hermione placed the books she had brought back on the desk while Harry picked out two fresh sets of uniform for them to change into.

They had finished their morning training before they had left the House.

"We'll be doing this mission together?" Harry asked as he looked at Toll for affirmation. His burly instructor gave a brief nod as he went to the panel and prepared for the new mission. He shot a brief glance at Hermione. They have duelled together as partners against magical battle mannequins but have never put their partnership into a test. She gave him a nod.

We can do this, Harry, she thought confidently as she reloaded her pistol and covered his back.

He responded by smoothly drawing the Sword of Gryffindor out of the richly decorated scabbard hanging at his side and holding it firmly with his hands. Harry lowered himself into a defensive position, with the sword held in front of his face. "We are ready, Toll."

The room began to frizzy and soon they found themselves in the foyer of a building. It was completely quiet.

I think it's too quiet. We'll try disillusioning ourselves. I'm not too sure if there are sensors that detected invisible or disillusioned people. Hermione thought. Harry silently cast a disillusion spell on the both of them.

We'll try. Are we supposed to head up? Harry thought as he glanced around the area. It was clear.

I've got a feeling it won't be that simple. Hermione answered in thought. Try going that way. She pointed to the narrow corridor near the grand staircase.

A simple walk in the park? With Toll in control? There's no way. He thought as he swiftly moved in that direction she had pointed. Searching every room as he moved down the narrow corridor, he found that they were all offices. Harry and Hermione found all the rooms to be clear.

"Stupefy!" Suddenly, they saw a blast of red light being shot at their direction. Harry and Hermione both ducked behind the door way as the spell hit the wall behind them.

Apparently, disillusionment doesn't work here. Harry thought as he hid behind the wall.

I can see that. Hermione answered as she shot the person straight on the chest, stunning him, causing him to collapse onto the ground.

A group of masked men suddenly appeared from the room near them and began to throw spells at them. Hermione shot at one of the overhanging beams above some of the masked men while Harry dashed forward with his sword. He casually swung his sword to deflect one of the spells and knocked one of them out with his blade.

Since Harry could listen to Hermione's thoughts, they worked very well together. He ducked whenever he realised that he was standing in her way and deflected all the spells that were aimed at them. She took out those who were not squashed by the collapsing beam and were too far for Harry to reach. Harry took out those masked men in front by touching them with his sword. He discovered that the sword could hold spells, which explained why it was dull in the first place and lined it with a stunning spell. Both of them quickly retreated back to the lobby and began their assault on the second level. They were met by a small army of masked men throwing an assortment of spells at them. Those spells were deflected by a wall of water Hermione had conjured. Harry immediately cast a wide area lighting spell, in which a ring of lightning spectacularly rose from the ground and shocked those who didn't have time to cast their shield up. They collapsed on the floor, stunned. There were only a few left unharmed in the room, which Hermione took them out by shooting them with her pistol.

I think you look gorgeous in that pose. Harry thought cheekily as he blasted a masked man with a “Stupefy” and ducked nimbly from the spell.

I’m busy here, love. Please don’t distract me. Hermione thought in mild embarrassment as she continued shooting their enemies with her pistol. Harry grinned in amusement as he dodged another incoming spell and fired several stunning spells back at them. As they continued to battle on, Harry realised that prolong usage of elemental magic made him tired easily, so he decided to stick with standard spells and his sword. He swiftly stunned a masked man at the side as he rapidly moved down the corridor, with Hermione covering his back. Don’t you think it’s strange that we are only encountering wizards who can cast spells?

“Accio Sword!” He heard someone shouted. The Sword of Gryffindor flew out of Harry’s hand but since Hermione was able to take the person down, the sword flew to the end of the long corridor instead of flying into the enemy’s hand. This was followed by a rapid firing of stunning spells by the masked men. They leapt out of harm’s way and hurriedly took cover behind a convenient statue or a wall.

You’ve got your wish. There are swordsmen. Hermione observed as she shot the wizards casting offensive spells at the far end of the corridor with her pistol. The dull corridor was lighted up by the various colour of offensive spells exchanged from both sides. By then, Harry had ejected his wand from its holster and was firing a chain of “Stupefy” spells at the charging warriors. Some of the stunning spell hit them squarely on their bodies and the charging swordsmen collapsed onto the ground. However, there were a few, unflustered by the fall of their comrades, charging straight at them, deflecting his spells effortlessly. Even Hermione could not get a clear shot at them since she was occupied with shooting the irritating wizards casting an assortment of offensive spells at them.

With the Sword of Gryffindor at the other end of the room, they were in the losing end if the swordsmen charged straight at them.

At this crucial moment, Harry decided to take a risk. He leapt away the statue he was hiding, summoned his sword with his hand and

shooting several of the charging warriors with “Stupefy” spells with his wand as he dashed towards the swordsmen. Some of the remaining warriors collapsed after being hit by the spells. Only one swordsman remained. Harry and that masked warrior were getting close. The masked warrior swung his sword up in preparation to cleave it down on Harry as they crossed paths. Harry dodged slightly to the right, grabbed the Sword of Gryffindor from mid-air with his left hand and hit him hard with the side of the sword. The spells meant for Harry hit the enemy in front of him and acted like a shield. Hermione took the opportunity to come out of hiding and shoot them. She stunned the remaining enemies quickly. Harry hurriedly put his wand back into the holster and lined the sword with stunning spell.

I hate it when you are this reckless. She admonished mentally as she hurriedly loaded her gun. Please remember to pay attention and think before you react.

Yes dear. He answered simply as they continued on with the mission. They managed to clear the level with much effort since they were dealing with wizards and warriors at the same time. Hermione alternated between shooting and casting wall made of water to defend them from spells cast at them. Harry engaged with several swordsmen in a close combat while deflecting spells with his sword. It was the only time when Harry showed the calibre of his swordplay. He moved swiftly and agilely, parrying, blocking, attacking, and deflecting. He flowed from one form to another swiftly as he took on a group of swordsmen. Since all he needed was to hit them once with his sword, they were all stunned after a while.

Hermione on the other hand, alternated between hiding behind the wall and shooting the wizards casting spells. Harry did a good job deflecting most of the spells, giving her the opening to shoot them. They managed to finish their mission that way and had slowly worked their way end to the fifth floor before their mission ended.

Toll had nothing but compliments when he evaluated the mission. Naturally, he did mention Harry's moment of carelessness, but he was highly satisfied with the high level of cooperation they displayed in their simulated training.

The trip back to the House had been a fruitful one and it had helped them to set a new direction. Hermione headed to the common room to have the usual Occlumency session with Luna and Neville while Harry stayed in the quarters to speak to Charles about his formal introduction to the Wizard Society.

The date was set for two weeks later, the earliest they could manage since the guests needed time to respond. Charles immediately went back to the Potter mansion to begin the preparations since invitation needed to be dispatched by House elves instead of the owls immediately and an announcement was needed to be placed in the newspaper. Harry was immensely thankful that he had such a capable team of house elves to aid him. He knew he could not get anything done with his lack of experience in this field.

Charles hurriedly returned with a stack of invitations Harry had to address. Under Dobby's watchful eye, Harry finished signing his name on every the invitation and sealing every regal-looking envelope with the Potter's crest. It was breakfast time when Harry had finished with all the invitations. He had lost track of which families he was inviting, but he was convinced he would be inviting all the pure-blood families in the Wizarding Society. When he finally turned up in the common room, Harry was glad to see that there was a wide beam on Luna's face. Neville had the usual frown on his face after his mediation.

"How's everything?" Hermione asked in concern as she peered at Harry.

"As well as can be expected, I suppose. The date of my formal introduction to society will be two weeks hence, on a Saturday evening. Charles is confident that he will have prepared everything by then. I've finished extending the invitation to all pure-blooded families. It's going to be a busy week." Harry answered simply.

"Is it a going to be a traditional ceremony with a Ball?" Neville asked curiously. "It makes sense for most who inherit the title of Lord to hold a ball since they are of marriageable age. However, for you, it might defeat the purpose. You've a girlfriend." Neville continued.

"I'll just have to dance. Hermione has agreed to accompany me." Harry smiled as he glanced at her with a tender expression. He looked back at his friends. "I'm sure your families will inform you soon about the invitation and their decision." Harry concluded. "I'm famished. Let's head down for breakfast." Hermione smiled in amusement as she hooked her arm around his and they headed down to the Great Hall for breakfast.

"What kind of lesson do you think we'll have today for Care of Magical Creatures?" Harry asked curiously as they walked out of the castle in the direction of Hagrid's Hut. Ron was trailing quietly behind them, with his hands in his pockets.

"Beats me," answered Neville simply as he shrugged. "The first Care of Magical Creature lesson was held in a classroom since it was pouring outside. He went over the creatures found in the Forbidden Forest."

"Ah," said Hermione. "So this is the first official lesson outside the Castle?" She inquired as they went down the sloping lawns to Hagrid's hut on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. A pang of guilt hit him when he realised that he hadn't spoken to Hagrid in a while. They spotted three familiar backs ahead of them and they realised that they would be having their lessons with the Slytherin.

After the strange conversation they'd had, Harry could not make out if Malfoy was a foe or a friend. Before they could cross each other's path, Hagrid came out of his hut in his moleskin overcoat, with Fang the boarhound by his side.

"C'mon now, get a move on!" He called as the class approached him slowly. "Got a real treat for yeh today! Everyone here? Right, follow me!" He called as he strolled in the direction of the Forbidden Forest.

Harry and Hermione exchanged a look of worry between each other. For a moment, they had a sinking feeling that Hagrid was going to have his lesson in the Forest. Harry had enough of unpleasant memories in that place to last him a lifetime. Moreover, they were worried about what the students might think about having their first outdoor lesson inside Forest. However, they were relieved that after

five minutes of walking, they found themselves outside of a paddock, at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. There was nothing in there so they waited for Hagrid to give his instructions.

“Everyone gather round the fence here!” He called as the class approached the empty paddock. The students immediately started to gather. “Now, firs’ thing yeh’ll want ter do is open yer books...”

“How?” interrupted the cold, drawling voice of Draco Malfoy.

“Eh?” Hagrid glanced at him in surprise.

“How do we open this thing?” Malfoy repeated as he held his copy of The Monster Book of Monsters, which he’d bound shut with a rope. Others began to take out theirs out. Hagrid looked crestfallen when he realised that none had managed to open their books.

“Uh, yeh’ve got to stroke them.” Hagrid announced finally as if it was the most obvious thing. He took Hermione’s copy, ripped off the Spellotape that bound it and ran his forefinger down its spine. The book shivered, fell open and lay silent in his hand.

The class watched in astonishment. How were they going to do that without being bitten?

“Righ’ then, so yeh’ve got yer books an’ now yeh need the Magical Crea’ures. I’ll go get ‘em while yeh open yer books. Hang on...” He strode into the forest and went out of sight.

“That oaf teaching classes, my dad is going to have a fit when I tell him about it.” Malfoy sniggered as the rest of the Slytherin laughed. Harry was about to ask him to shut up when he spotted some creatures trotting into the paddock. They had the bodies, hind legs and tails of horses, but the front legs, wings and heads of what seemed to be giant eagles with steel-coloured beaks and large, brilliantly orange eyes. The talons on their front legs were half a foot long and lethal-looking. He identified them immediately as Hippogriffs. Hermione and Harry were in awe of the large creatures that Hagrid

had tethered to the fences. Elissa had taught them about these beautiful creatures but they never imagined that they would have the chance to see them up close at Hogwarts. The Hippogriffs coats gleamed in the sun. Harry admired the way their coats changed smoothly from feather to hair. They were each a different colour, stormy grey, bronze, a pinkish roan, chestnut and inky black.

“Hippogriffs. Beau’iful aren’t they?” Hagrid said as he waved his large hand at them. Harry and Hermione moved closer to the fences to take a better look at them. The rest soon cautiously moved in to look.

“The firs’ thing yeh gotta know abou’ Hippogriffs is that they’re proud,” said Hagrid. “Never offend one, ‘case it’s the last thing yeh do,” warned Hagrid gravely. He rubbed his hands together. “Yeh always wait fer ‘he Hippogriffs ter make the firs’ move. It’s polite, see? Yeh walk towards him an’ yeh bow, an’ yeh wait. If he bows back, yeh’re allowed ter touch him. If he doesn’t, get away from him.” He concluded as he stared at the class excitedly.

“Who wants ter go first?”

The Hippogriffs displayed their prowess and showed that they are completely unlike tame creatures such as cute kittens as they tossed their fierce heads and flexed their powerful wings. Most of the class had backed away in fear. Harry and Hermione knew that Hippogriffs could get very aggressive when provoked.

“No one?” Hagrid pleaded.

Mustering his Gryffindor courage, “I’ll do it,” said Harry as he climbed gracefully over the paddock fence. He didn’t want Hagrid’s lesson to fail.

“Good man, Harry!” roared Hagrid. “This is Buckbeak.” He said as he untied one of the chains and pulled the stormy grey Hippogriff away from the others and slipped the leather collar off. The class appeared to be holding their breath. He could sense Hermione’s worry.

I’ll be fine, thought Harry as he shot a glance at Hermione. She nodded.

“Easy now, Harry.” Hagrid said quietly. Harry maintained eye contact with the fierce looking Buckbeak. The stormy grey Hippogriff had fixed one large orange eye on him. Harry swallowed visibly, took a step back and took a bow. The Hippogriff was staring at him with his brilliantly orange eye.

He looks alright to me, came a baritone voice. Maybe I should take a bow.

Harry looked up in surprise. The large Hippogriff bent his front scaly knees and sank into a brief bow.

“Well done, Harry! Yeh can touch him! Pat his beak! Go on!” Hagrid encouraged excitedly.

Oh wow, said the same voice flatly as the Hippogriff stared lazily at him. Harry looked unsurely at the Hippogriff. I won’t bite you, silly. I’ll probably scratch you if you don’t show me enough respect, said that voice. Harry blinked. It was Buckbeak’s voice. He cautiously moved towards the Large Hippogriff and patted him on his steel-coloured beak. That’s better, Buckbeak said lazily as he closed his eyes. He sounded as if he enjoyed it. The class broke into applause at the sight.

“I’m glad that you enjoy it, Buckbeak.” said Harry with a warm smile on his face. “You’ve such nice coat.”

Thank you, two-legged, answered Buckbeak. You can understand what I’m saying?

“Yes, I do. I reckon Hagrid would let you stretched you wings a bit.” Harry said quietly as he stroked his fine coat. True to his word, Hagrid asked him to climb onto Buckbeak. Buckbeak waited anxiously for Harry to climb onto his back. When he felt that Harry was comfortably seated on him then he took off. Harry had enough time to hold onto his neck as he soared into the air. Mind my feathers, warned Buckbeak as he took Harry on a quick aerial tour of the Forbidden Forest. Harry had never flown into this area with his broomstick before, so he took the opportunity to admire the scenery.

Buckbeak landed firmly on his four legs in the paddock after they finished touring the entire area. Harry realised that the Forbidden Forest was bigger than he had imagined. He straightened himself when he felt a heavy thud.

“Good job, Harry!” Hagrid roared as the class cheered loudly for his success. Harry slowly climbed off the Hippogriff and joined his wife at the side of the paddock. There was a look of admiration on her face as she looked at him. Harry tenderly placed his arm around her shoulder as they watched.

Encouraged by Harry’s success, the class climbed cautiously into the paddock. Hagrid untied the Hippogriffs one by one. Soon, everyone was nervously bowing all across the paddock. Ron’s Hippogriff didn’t want to bow, so he had to run away from it until Hermione pointed out that he was not maintaining eye contact with it.

For Hermione, it was an enjoyable lesson since it was her first time interacting with animals that were not her pets. She also had a nice conversation with Buckbeak. He lazily sat on the ground and allowed Hermione to pat his steel-coloured beak as they talked. It was only when Hermione and Harry realised that Neville was having problems with the Hippogriff he was assigned to that they left to help him.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle took over handling Buckbeak. He had bowed to Malfoy, who was patting his beak, looking disdainful. Malfoy had never paid attention to what he was saying since he was raised to be mean and to look down on all who were not of the same stature as him, especially animals. He unwittingly did the one thing that Hagrid had warned them not to - he insulted a Hippogriff.

Why you! Buckbeak growled as he tried to attack Malfoy. Everyone was surprised when Harry had suddenly knocked the boy out of its way to the fences. “No, Buckbeak,” said Harry firmly as he stood between the furious Hippogriff which was trying to get its talons on the pale Slytherin boy. Malfoy had taken the opportunity to crawl out of the paddock hastily while Hagrid wrestled Buckbeak into the collar as he continued to try to get at Malfoy.

Hermione immediately rushed forward and joined her husband placating the irate Hippogriff. "Relax, Buckbeak. You're going to hurt yourself if you keep straining the collar." She said soothingly as she stroked his side. With Malfoy out of his sight and Harry and Hermione's calming words, the fierce Hippogriff soon cooled down and moved to the end of the paddock away from the class. Hagrid, seeing that they were able to handle Buckbeak well, left him to their capable hands, and went to have a good talk with Malfoy about his conduct. The class soon resumed as normal, seeing that everything was alright. Everyone was shocked that a Gryffindor had actually saved a Slytherin, especially since that Gryffindor was Potter and Malfoy was the Slytherin. Neville hurried over to their side after seeing that Buckbeak had calmed down. He spotted a fairly deep cut on Harry's arm. He was cut by Buckbeak's talons while he was straining to get Malfoy.

"Are you alright, Harry? Do you need to go to the Hospital Wing to be healed?" Neville asked in concern as he peered at the wound. Harry cast a cleaning spell to clean up the wound then a simple healing spell to patch the wound up. His wound mended perfectly.

"I guess you don't need a visit to the hospital wing. I'm glad you're okay," added Neville as he patted Harry on the shoulder. Harry smiled gratefully in response.

"I appreciate your concern." Harry said warmly. "I think Hagrid is going on with the second part of our lesson, so you'd best go back to your Hippogriff." Neville nodded and dashed off.

Hermione narrowed her eyes into slits as she looked at him with great suspicion. "I know you're hiding something from me. What stirred you to help Malfoy?" Hermione asked curiously. Everyone knew that they were nemeses since the day they met, moreover Gryffindors never got along well with Slytherins.

"I was returning a favour," Harry responded simply as he shrugged. "Besides, you know he didn't mean it, he always speaks like that. I hope he learns to pay more attention to his words." Harry concluded as he patted Buckbeak's side.

“A favour?” She echoed questioningly as she raised her eyebrows.

“Yes, a favour,” smiled Harry enigmatically as he watched Buckbeak slumber peacefully.

They realised that saving Malfoy did have its advantages. For the rest of the week, the Slytherins treated Harry and his friends with great respect. Harry guess that it was partly due to the fact that everyone in school knew that Harry was now Lord Gryffindor, Head of the Ancient and Noble House of Potter, after reading the announcement made in Daily Prophet the day after the incident. Draco Malfoy thanked him by sending a hastily scrawled, unsigned ‘Thank You’ note. He knew who it belonged to because of the way the letter was sent – Malfoy’s outstanding eagle owl delivered the note to him.

Through the week, Harry was occupied with his duties as Lord. Charles made sure that he had a fitting for the dress robe he was wearing on the day of the ball. Charles grilled Harry about the history of the Potters. It was indeed as ‘ancient’ and ‘noble’ as the family title suggested. The Potters were one of the first few Wizarding families, along with Black, Greengrass, and Bones in that order. This was something he’d learned in Elissa’s classes. He was amazed when he realised that Godric Gryffindor had taken the name Gryffindor because he was once saved by a Griffin. Harry had no doubt that the Griffin must have been Cathoir, the one that created the Magical World along with Edmund. Hermione was not spared from the lessons despite not attending the ceremony as his spouse.

Harry and Hermione found the lessons on Potters’ history to be very interesting. They detected two intriguing trends after studying the history carefully. Harry realised that Potter men were generally attracted to intelligent women and married them. Due to these great marriages, the Potters’ assets multiplied immensely through sound investments. The second thing they realised was that Potters tend to be very involved with the affairs of Wizarding society. To illustrate, Godric Gryffindor was concerned about the lack of magical education in Wizarding Britain and became one of the founders of Hogwarts. Charles later explained it was due to the early education the Potter children received that made the family so famous for being interested in the problems within the Wizarding society and for their healthy

respect for the other Magical creatures. Harry realised that the shoes he had to fill as Lord Potter was massive.

Charles was delighted when he saw the respect Harry and Hermione had for the Potter family. He also saw Harry's apprehension about matching up to the previous Lord Potters before him and was relieved. Harry's humility and drive to be better would serve him well in the future. He took an empty regal book that looked like the other History books that Harry and Hermione were reading and handed it to Harry. "My lord and lady, we will be waiting to fill this with the deeds you've done as Lord and Lady Potter so that your descendants can learn from your success, avoid your failures and appreciate the legacy you've left for them. With every new Lord, a new chapter of Potters' history will be added. I'm sure this new section will be as thrilling and fascinating as the other chapters." Charles added solemnly.

"Thank you, Charles," said Harry gratefully as he returned the book to the elder house elf.

When they were not preoccupied with these duties, they had to deal with school. Harry and Hermione were finally convinced that Dumbledore was unwilling to help them with their cause after having a talk with Professor McGonagall and Professor Lupin one afternoon. The two professors had begun to doubt the decisions the Leader of Light made. Sirius' plight was a clear example that they shouldn't have blindly listened to Dumbledore without checking things out for themselves. They pledged all their resources to help Harry when they found out that he'd decided to be formally introduced as Lord Potter sooner simply because he wanted to have the ability to influence others to give Sirius a proper trial.

Lessons were a breeze for Harry and Hermione. They spend most of their time coaching their peers and recapping their third year work. The professors teaching them continued to be very pleased with their work. They were pleasantly surprised when they realised that Harry's handwriting had improved. It was now an elegant scrawl, comparable to Hermione's beautiful neat handwriting, instead of his usual messy scribbles. To make his week even busier, his first Quidditch match was coming up soon. Practices every evening took up all his time before dinner. Oliver Wood, Captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team,

was determined to see Gryffindor win the Quidditch Cup, since it was his last year at Hogwarts. Harry did not grumble since flying helped him to unwind, but he was worried about his wife. She faithfully accompanied him to every practice and patiently waited for him in the stands until practice ended. It was a gesture that he appreciated greatly but he knew that she was wasting valuable time doing so. Thus, he tried to dissuade Hermione from accompanying him, but she refused to budge. She did try to make him feel better by using the time to tutor Neville or do her homework. He finally relented and thanked her by taking her on a quiet stroll after practice every day regardless of his condition.

Harry and Hermione had to go to the House frequently for lessons. They would slip into the House at bedtime to continue their physical training with Toll, lessons on politics with Elissa and Edmund, finish their daily homework, and get enough rest. Occasionally, Hedwig would join them so that she could have some physical training with Toll and learn more duelling tactics from El.

Harry and Hermione took some time out during the week to meet Hedwig's new friend. Harry was shocked when he realised that Callan, the male snowy owl was the same owl who told him off on his birthday.

Flashback

"Who might you be from?" Harry asked as he looked at the rather noble looking snowy owl. The owl opened his eyes in a rather conceited fashion as he fixed his yellow eyes on him with apparent distaste.

Can't you read the letter? An irritated male voice came into his head as the owl held out his leg where three envelopes and a parcel were attached on it. Harry chuckled as he took the letters and the parcel.

"Thank you." Harry grinned brightly. He remembered that he could speak to animals with the ring.

You're welcome. I'm glad that you at least have the manners to thank me after making me wait so long. The owl had added arrogantly as

he stared at Harry. I am surprised that you can understand what I'm saying.

"I am sorry. I was shocked when I realised I could talk to my owl." Harry added apologetically. "Would you feel better with a drink of water and some rest?" Harry asked politely.

The letters are from Hogwarts. I'd best be going. Thank you for the offer. With that, the owl stretched his wings and flew out from the window.

End Flashback

Hermione and Hedwig laughed after Harry had shared the incident. Hedwig felt slightly sheepish that she did not recognise him at first sight like Harry.

"It's simply because you haven't been put down by an owl before," quipped Harry as he laughed. "You tend to remember others better if they were the first of their kind to put you down." Harry chuckled as he stroked Callan.

Everyone hooted in laughter.

During their conversation, Hermione noticed the large wound on Callan's wing, so she healed him with a complex spell, using Harry's magic. The spell regenerated new tissues and knitted them together. When the spell was finished, his wing looked as good as new. Callan was overjoyed when he flapped his newly mended wing and felt no pain. He thanked them profusely. He excitedly flew off to show his owner his healed wing. Hedwig's joy did not go unnoticed by Harry or Hermione.

Harry and Hermione left the Owlery with a new task. They were very excited at how close the two owls were.

"Don't you think it's time to speak to Callan's owner?" He asked quietly as they walked down the spiral stairs leading back into the main building of the castle.

“Maybe we can match-make Crookshanks to Callan’s owner’s cat. I heard that she has always kept a female cat.” Hermione added excitedly.

Harry smiled. “You know how picky Crookshanks can get. I do really want to meet his owner. I sure she’s a very nice girl since she had the heart to save a post owl. “

“We’ll ask Callan to introduce us to his new owner in the near future, “concluded Hermione as she smiled.

“Who do you think it might be?” Harry wondered.

A/N: First I must apologise if I haven't reply to your review. For some odd reason, the website hang everytime I tried to do so. Thank you for your wonderful reviews. I was pleased to received very constructive reviews from some of the readers. Thank you frustr8dwriter for taking the time to edit my work =) Please tell me how you felt about the new chapter. Have a great week ahead.

Chapter 12

Beta-read by frustr8dwriter

His blue eyes widened in surprise when he saw the red wax seal on the regal looking envelope. Glancing through his half moon spectacles at the polite house elf in surprise, Dumbledore saw that it was wearing the same crest- the crest of the Ancient and Noble House of the Potters. He hurriedly opened the letter and found that it was an invitation to Lord's Potter formal introduction to the Wizarding Society. He was further astonished when saw that the event was going to be held two weeks' time. What game was Harry playing now? He thought as he looked at the invitation. No matter, it was the ceremony of the one of the oldest and richest families in the Wizarding community. Being the head of the Wizengamot, he had to make an appearance. He hurriedly wrote a suitable reply and handed it over to the elf that vanished instantly after bowing deeply. He did not like the way things were going and if his hunch was right, Lord Potter had something up his sleeve. He was getting exceedingly difficult to rein in.

It was a week ago since Harry received the reply from Dumbledore among the replies he received from the other families. He was not surprised that he had accepted because even Malfoy had sent a polite response expressing his joy to be given the privilege to attend such an event. His eyebrows knitted into a frown as he stared at the pile of responses sitting neatly at his desk. Well, he asked to invite every single family to this ceremony. Earlier as he was casually flipping through the post, he'd discovered that most of the families would be bringing their oldest child to the event. He placed his signature on the last document. It was a request for his approval of the budget for the ceremony. The boy stood up and stretched as his house elf, Dobby, watched on curiously.

"My Lord, am I permitted to speak what's on my mind?" He asked timidly as he looked at Harry with his abnormally large eyes. Harry raised his eyebrows in surprise at Dobby's demeanour.

“Absolutely – but please drop the ‘my lord’ and use my name instead.” Harry answered warmly as he glanced at the house elf kindly. The house elf looked very nervous.

“It has been an honour to serve my lord as his personal house elf,” began Dobby timidly, “but could my lord please give this prestigious position to another more deserving house elf?” He questioned as he bowed deeply.

A frown ceased Harry’s forehead. “Is something wrong, Dobby?” Harry pressed politely. He was so concerned about the reason for his request that he forgot to remind Dobby to address him by his name.

He began to fidget even more. “Well, it would not look good on you, my lord. I am, after all, a castaway from the House of the Malfoy. The other families will be speculating about it.” He continued.

“That’s something you shouldn’t worry about, Dobby.” Harry assured firmly. “I believe that it is my decision as to who I want to work for me and not the other Heads. Besides, who would better to take this position than a house elf, who despite serving another family, tried to warn me of the dangers that I might face? If the Malfoys say anything about it, they will regret it. I think you may safely keep the position.” Harry added warmly. The eyes of the house elf were filled with tears as he bowed deeply and thanked him. He excused himself so that he could help out with the preparation over at Potter Mansion. The realisation that he needed to be somewhere dawned upon him and he hurriedly rushed out of his study room.

A smile graced his face when he spotted a girl speaking quietly to a white owl in the Owlery as he rushed up from his quarters. Her long golden hair cascaded down to her shoulders. “Good morning, are you Callan’s owner?” Harry asked politely as he slowly approached her. The girl turned around at the sound of his voice. He recognised the face at once. It was Daphne Greengrass, the infamous Ice Queen of Hogwarts. He’d had several classes with her since first year but he never had the chance to speak to her. The Slytherin girl was undoubtedly the most beautiful girl in his year and one of the prettiest girls in Hogwarts. He was surprised to see her. Who would’ve guessed that the warm, kind soul would be her? “We’ve never been

formally introduced. I'm Harry Potter, owner of this beautiful white owl perching beside Callan." He introduced smoothly as he pointed to Hedwig. There was a warm smile on his lips as he looked at the emotionless girl.

"Good morning Potter, should I address you as Lord Potter instead? I'm Daphne Greengrass. How'd you know my owl's name?" She asked with mild curiosity while remaining detached.

"Hedwig told me. She's my familiar," Harry grinned brightly. "And it's neither, Greengrass. You can call me Harry." Harry answered simply as he raised his arm. Hedwig flew away from the stand and perched on his arm. His smile became affectionate when he looked at her and stroked the white snowy owl. Even though Callan had introduced himself to him later, he first learned of the name from Hedwig.

A small smile touched her lips. "How could I forget? Hedwig and your cat attacked Weasley on the first day, hence she must be able to feel your mood and understand our language. She is such a pretty owl. I've never seen female snowy owl that was this white." She answered as she stroked Callan gently. "By the way, it's Daphne then, Harry."

"Yes, she is very pretty. I realised how exceedingly rare she is when I read up on snowy owls. Female snowy owls tend to have a lot of spotting. It's only the male snowy owls that are pure white." He explained as he scratched her under her beak. Hedwig was very happy that Daphne had praised her. "Hedwig thanks you for the compliment and thinks you're very beautiful too." Harry said as he chuckled lightly. Daphne fondly stroked her at the spot under her beak and she hooted in glee.

"Why, thank you, Hedwig. It's the first time I'm praised by an owl." Daphne smiled cordially at the owl.

Harry swallowed visibly when he saw how stunning she looked with a warm smile on her lips. His cheeks pinked slightly. Darn those hormones. He thought. Hedwig turned her head to glance curiously at him.

You should be glad that Hermione isn't here with you. She admonished slightly.

It was a natural reaction I really couldn't help it. He admitted uncomfortably, I mean I always hear pretty she is. I never thought she was pretty until now.

Daphne gave Callan his owl treats before turning to Harry. "Well, I'm heading down for breakfast. I guess I see you around, Harry." Daphne said coolly. Hedwig flew back to her perch.

"Wait, Daphne," Harry said as he stood in front of her. Her blue eyes slightly narrowed with suspicion at being stopped. "May I walk with you to the Great Hall? I'm going that way as well and I'd like to talk to you about." He shot a side -glance at the snowy owls staring at him. "It's none of your business, Callan and Hedwig." He added. They hooted in annoyance.

"Well, I think I'll tell you about it as we make our way to the Great Hall." He added when she nodded apprehensively. He shot a glance at them to make sure that their familiars were not following them before he followed Daphne out of the Owlery.

There was a frown on her face when they walked quietly down the winding stairs. Harry made sure they were safely out of their owls' hearing range before he spoke to her. He noticed the frown and said, "Well, I must make my intentions clear. I'm not trying to pick up on you. I'm very happy with Hermione." He admitted honestly. "I just wanted to talk to you about Hedwig and Callan." Harry continued.

Daphne relaxed visibly and smiled. Her cheeks were slightly pink with embarrassment. "I'm sorry. I noticed that you were becoming uncomfortable, the same way other boys do before they confess their affections for me. So you noticed that Hedwig and Callan are always spending their time together?"

Harry reddened. "Sorry, it was a hormonal reaction. " Harry admitted sheepishly. "Anyway, yes, I did, that is why I wanted to talk to you about it. It's rare that Hedwig found someone she likes that much

since she is so different. I'm sure it's the same for Callan, too, since he's one of a kind."

"He's quite extraordinary," agreed Daphne wholly as she nodded her head. "He refused to leave after he'd recovered and I realised that he wanted to show his gratitude by being my pet. It's very unheard of in the Wizarding World that owls make decisions such as this on their own. For that reason, I decided to keep him. I've also got another pet named Katrina. They get along famously."

"Just like Crookshanks and Hedwig. " Harry grinned brightly as he recalled how his two familiars first met each other. "They had a staring competition. Hedwig won naturally since she has such big amber eyes." They exchanged interesting tales about their pets excitedly until they found themselves in the Great Hall. Daphne's closest friends Tracy Davis and Blaise Zabini, along with the rest of Hogwarts, were surprised to the two of them together. They parted amicably, with smiles on their faces after he promised her that he would introduce Hermione to her as soon as she arrived.

Harry whistled a joyful tune as he walked towards the Gryffindor table. He was certain that they would become friends. He had no doubt that Hermione would like her were a lot of people in the hall. He was surprised that his friends were not at the table yet. It was shaping up to be a good morning until he saw a lanky male redhead approaching him. Harry was about to greet him warmly when he saw that his face was as red as the roots of his hair in rage.

"What were you doing with a Slytherin? " He spat as he pointed a finger at Harry insolently. "I mean even if you want to get your hands under someone's skirt, you shouldn't do it with a Slytherin. I thought saving one of them was bad enough, now you want to date another one?" Ron demanded loudly.

His voice echoed through the silent hall eerily. Everyone had quieted down to watch the show.

Harry glanced around and realised that once again, all eyes were upon them. He sighed inwardly. "I don't have any such intentions towards Daphne. Besides, girls are not objects; they deserve our

respect, Ron, so mind your words.” He admonished. “I don’t see why it was a big deal that I saved a Slytherin. I mean, it doesn’t matter which house we belong to. We are all from Hogwarts. We should look out for one another. That’s the way it should always be.” He concluded firmly. There were murmurs of approval at that statement.

“You’re barking mad.” Ron declared as he walked to the end of the table and sat there. Harry caught the appreciative glances that Daphne and her friends shot in his direction and nodded. He walked to usual place at the Gryffindor table and waited for his friends patiently. Ginny, who’d heard them, walked over to join him. “Do you mind if I join you?”

Harry shook his head and gestured to a seat.

“I’m sorry about Ron. He doesn’t think before he acts.” She said apologetically.

“He’s been that way since I’ve known him.” Harry stated as he shrugged casually. “I can’t believe he leapt to the conclusion that I want to sleep with Daphne when I’m with Hermione.” He added as he drained the entire goblet of pumpkin juice.

“Well, anyone can see that things between you and Hermione have been going really well. Anyway, it’s unusual to see you at the Great Hall without her. Is everything okay?”

Harry chuckled lightly. “Everything is fine. We each had to attend to different things today.” He explained. “Now that you mention it, Hermione and I must seem like we’ve been joined at the hip since we started dating.”

“Yeah,” answered Ginny softly. A frown ceased her face briefly. She glanced at Harry and realised that he didn’t noticed it. “Actually, that’s not true. The two of you have always been close - it’s been that way since first year. Now that you’ve started dating, it’s almost impossible to see her without you.”

"That was my intention," answered Harry enigmatically as he grinned. Before Ginny could question him further, she spotted Hermione, Luna, and Neville walking into the Great Hall.

"I've got to go to prepare for my classes. See you around, Harry." Ginny smiled sweetly and left.

"Okay, see you later," muttered Harry distractedly as he watched his wife. Her hair was clipped back and the masses of brown waves cascaded down to her shoulder. A warm smile graced his face as he stood up. She had smiled affectionately in return when she spotted him.

"Good morning," greeted Harry adoringly as he pecked on her lips. "Good morning, Luna and Neville. How was your lesson?"

For the first time since they had started their Occlumency lessons, Harry saw a smile on Neville's face. "I managed to calm down with a change of environment. I must say that meditating near the Black Lake in the morning is very relaxing. "

"I look forward to hearing that you've found your centre soon, mate. How about you, Luna? How are things coming?"

"Pretty great, actually - I'm half way there. I saw the Nettles this morning. I've just discovered today that they are attracted to lakes before dawn," replied Luna in her usual dreamy fashion. Harry smiled at her indulgently. "What about you? How was your preparation for the ceremony?" Luna asked curiously as she began to fill up her plate with food after drinking from her goblet.

"Ah, it was okay," answered Harry as he helped Hermione to get some food. Neville and Luna were so used to seeing this that they said nothing. Hermione flashed an appreciative smile at him. "I can't believe that the whole event is coming up this Saturday. I haven't really finished preparing an adequate speech."

Neville quirked one of his eyebrows and said, "You're thirteen. They don't expect you to say much." Neville took a bite of his food before continuing. "By the way, I'll be attending it with Gran."

“And I’ll be attending with my father.” Luna added.

“That’s great!” Harry smiled as he rubbed his hands. He had additional plans since the day after the ceremony would be September 19th – Hermione’s birthday. Hermione glanced at him quizzically at his sudden enthusiasm. Before she could ask him what was going on, a female voice interrupted them.

“I wanted to come over to thank you for defending me earlier, Harry.” Daphne said as she came up to the Gryffindor table. “Plus, I’m here for the introduction you promised.” Hermione’s eyes had widened with disbelief as she glanced at Harry and found him smiling sheepishly at her before he stood up.

“It was no problem, really.” added Harry cordially. “Daphne, this is my wonderful girlfriend, Hermione Granger. Crookshanks belongs to her.” He introduced. Turning to Hermione, who had stood up at his introduction, he said. “This is Daphne Greengrass, Callan’s mystery owner.” He deliberately stressed the fact that she was the owner of the male snowy owl since Hermione was speculating about when Harry had the opportunity to talk to her.

Was she the one you thought as pretty just now? You went to the Owlery to meet the owner of Callan just now, didn't you?

Well, yes to both questions. It's a hormonal reaction. I'm at the age to notice girls. By the way I prefer girls with brown, wavy hair, Harry thought.

Hermione smiled and shook Daphne’s hand. There was real warmth in her eyes as she did so.

“Thank you for healing Callan, Granger.” added Daphne with a smile. “It was good of you relieve his pain. I could see that he was ecstatic.”

“Calling me Hermione would be fine, Daphne. It was really nothing. I couldn’t leave him like that. He is such an adorable and proud owl, very much like Hedwig.” Hermione grinned cordially. Daphne chuckled softly at Hermione’s words and her joy when talking about

their pets. Hermione frowned in confusion and glanced at Harry. The Ice Queen is laughing? There was an amused smile tugging his lips.

"I apologise for laughing, it's just that Harry made a bet with me. He was confident that I'd like you very much. Initially, I was a bit apprehensive, but now I realise that he was right." Daphne beamed. "I forgot to introduce my close friends to you. This is Tracey Davis and Blaise Zabini."

Hermione took the cue to introduce their companions to them.

"These are our friends, Luna Lovegood and Neville Longbottom." Hermione introduced their friends to each other. They greeted each other affably. "Well, I guess that means I'll have to join you guys in the future?" Daphne asked as arched her eyebrow quizzically.

"Well, you did bet on it." Harry reminded with a grin.

Hermione stared at him as if he had grown two heads. "What would've happened if she didn't like me?"

"I'd lose the bet and I'd have to join her at the Slytherin table during mealtimes. However, I knew that I'd win the bet because of your common interest-both of you love animals." Harry quipped playfully and made room for their new friend.

"Well, that's a weird bet." Hermione laughed humorously as Daphne joined them at the Gryffindor table. Since Daphne was really like them- being more than what they seem to be, they got along famously and became fast friends.

It was one of the long breaks that third-year Gryffindors had so Harry and Neville decided to chill in the Gryffindor common room. For the first time, Harry realised just how isolated he had become from the rest of the house. Groups of Gryffindors either passed them by as if they didn't exist, or they would huddle in groups and whispered about him. He definitely felt disjointed from the house as he looked around the room.

They'd been spending too much time in the library or their quarters to really communicate with the rest of the house. In the past, Harry had the opportunity to talk to his fellow Gryffindors because they shared the same dorms but lately, he really didn't get to talk to too many of them. Neville was too absorbed with his book on Herbology to notice. Harry stood up and went to the entrance where he met the Weasley twins. He smiled and greeted them.

"Oh hello mate, it's rare to see you here," said one of the Weasley twins in surprise when they spotted Harry. "Don't have any Lord business to attend to? I heard from Ron that you've been very busy with it."

"No, there isn't much for me to do today. Do you know what are they whispering about?" Harry asked casually as he gestured around the room

"Why, I'm shocked that you'd ask us such a question-"

"-Very shocked indeed-" One of them added with great exaggeration.

"-We're sure it has got to do about saving Malfoy's ass and spending time with the Slytherins. Though, we must say that one of those Slytherin was hot." Both of them said together.

Their statement sparked comments from the other occupants in the room.

"It's right disloyal," called out Seamus from the corner as he played Wizard's Chess with Dean. "We were fine with having a Ravenclaw around, but now you're spending time with Slytherins. Isn't it bad enough that you've saved the offspring of a Death Eater?"

"What is wrong with Slytherin?" Harry demanded as he glanced around the room. "Slytherin is a house of Hogwarts like Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff."

"Nothing is wrong with them, Lord Potter, except that they are evil. I mean look what they've done to you in the past. You-Know-Who

came from that house and the majority of them are offspring of Death Eaters.” Someone added.

Before Harry could answer, he heard the sounds of chairs drawn out.

“Well, someone is now a high-and-mighty Lord, after all. He needs powerful connections. You can continue to boot lick them, but I’ve enough of the Slytherin lover. Let’s head back to the dorm.” Dean spat as he stood up and went up to the dorm. Seamus followed suit. One by one they left. The Gryffindor common room began to empty, leaving only Harry, Neville, and the Weasley twins.

“You know mate, there has always been a heated rivalry between Gryffindor and Slytherin.” The Weasley twins smiled. “They’ll just need time to get used to the fact that things are changing. Don’t worry, we’ll prank all those who try to make an issue out of it.” They smirked evilly.

Harry laughed lightly. “Don’t overdo it.” He grinned.

“We were thinking about making them really pro-Slytherin for a week.”

“I don’t think that can be considered overdoing it.”

“-We’ll see you around, Harry. We need to try and see if it works!” The twins concluded excitedly as they head back to their dorm.

His mood lightened up considerably after talking to the Weasley twins. Besides the fact that speaking to them was exactly like watching a tennis match, they never failed to entertain him with their antics. With an amused smile on his face, Harry sat next to Neville, who had placed the book he was reading on his lap.

“It’s not that I want to speak badly about them but Dean, Seamus and Ron are the main reason why things in Gryffindor tower are this way. When you moved out of the dorm and into your own quarters, Ron was complaining that you were Dumbledore’s boy and that you got away with everything including punishment for injuring him. You missed an entire week of lessons and are now focused on Hermione,

your studies, and your duties. You don't spend time with them anymore. Everything was made worse when you saved Malfoy. They didn't agree with what you were doing and thought that being Lord had really get into your head. The assumption solidified when the whole school watched you walking and talking with Daphne, a Slytherin." Neville added. "I'm sure it will all pass eventually. I mean everyone was talking about you last year when they discovered you could speak to snakes. Now, they've moved on to something else."

"Nev, how do you feel about everything? I mean you're friends with me. I'm sure they ignore you, too. I'm sure it's even worse since you share a dorm with them." Harry asked with concern.

Neville merely shrugged his shoulders. "I know who are my friends are, Harry. I don't care about the guys' opinions. Harry, after spending time with Daphne today and Luna for the past few weeks, I really believe that it doesn't matter what house you're from. We can still be friends." Neville grinned warmly.

"I believe the Slytherin lover club just added a new member." Harry joked lightly as he clapped on his back. "I'm heading over to meet Hermione. She's in the library, researching the chapter that Professor McGonagall is going to cover later. Do you want to come along?" He asked.

"Sure," Neville answered as he closed his book and followed Harry out.

By dinner, everyone in Hogwarts knew that most of Gryffindor House was in disagreement with Harry Potter because he was spending time with Slytherins. The Slytherins remained unusually quiet as the two other Houses became intrigued with it. The Gryffindors made sure that they sat as far away from them as possible when Daphne joined Harry's group at the table. Only Neville, Hermione, the Weasley twins, and Luna were willing to sit with him. Ginny wanted to join them but she was pulled away by Ron. Daphne was mildly surprised by the Gryffindors' reaction when she sat next to Harry. Everyone sitting near him had greeted her warmly.

"Have you had any problems with the Slytherins since started joining us at the Gryffindor table?" Harry asked Daphne as the rest were absorbed with their conversations. She merely smiled.

"It's a Slytherin habit to get good political connections and you're the Lord of the House of Potter. No one in Slytherin House would dare object to it. Once again the Gryffindors have proven to have courage and no wit. I mean it may be brave to take a stand and alienate a rising Lord, but I can't see what benefits they've accrued from it." Daphne scoffed slightly.

"You're sitting with plenty of Gryffindors, Daphne. I must say that some of the spirit of Gryffindor will rub off on you." Harry joked lightly.

"I'm certain I've already been moderately influenced. After all, I did the bravest and most Gryffindor thing by honouring our bet and speaking the truth. I could've pretended that I didn't really like Hermione and snake out of the whole deal," admitted Daphne as her eyes twinkled in amusement.

"Well, I found that I had the courage to speak up and told Professor Flitwick about my mistreatment in the hands of my housemates soon after I became friends with Harry and Hermione. Of course, I was intelligent enough to let the real Griffins confront the Ravenclaws." Luna added in her usual dreamy voice.

Everyone who heard the exchange of words, cracked up in laughter.

"Then I must say, Harry, that you're a true Gryffindor because you did the most foolhardy and brave thing by saving and making friends with a Slytherin." One of the twins joked as they roared in laughter.

There were tears in their eyes after they finished laughing. Everyone in the Great Hall had turned to look at them, wondering what had transpired between them. It was the first time they saw a group of students from different houses mixing so well together.

"So we now have pseudo-Gryffindors. I realised that all we need now is someone from Hufflepuff so that our group can represent all the four houses." Hermione observed keenly as she looked at the group.

"I always thought we'd one-" One of the twins added solemnly. The others glanced at each other in surprise.

"-Neville's so loyal, sometimes we forget that he's from the same house as us." The other twin continued as they cracked up in laughter.

"-Well, Hermione's too smart to be a Gryffindor-" Luna added as she smiled.

"Fred and George Weasley are too sneaky to be Gryffindors-" Neville commented. "So Harry is the only true Gryffindor, huh?"

"I beg to differ. He's too sly to be a real Gryffindor sometimes," added Hermione teasingly as she grinned at Harry. He flashed an amused smile in response.

The twins wore exaggerated expressions of shock.

"I didn't know-" One of them began.

"-You were a closet Slytherin.-" The other continued.

"-Explains a great deal, why you saved Malfoy and became friends with Daphne-"

"-since you are one of them after all."

"Shut up, fellow closet Slytherins." Harry said jokingly as he chuckled. "We shouldn't expose our real identities. It's not very Slytherinish to do that when we are supposed to be Gryffindors." Everyone howled in laughter. The corners of Hermione's lips lifted when she saw that dinner had taken his mind off the Gryffindors.

The week passed faster than he had imagined. His friends helped to take his mind off things as he spent all his time with them. Daphne was a great source of information regarding the Magical Society and he learnt even more from her. The rest of the week gave him the opportunity to learn more about his new friends. The Weasley twins had given their house one week to accept Harry's new friends since

they took that long to develop a new prank. Harry couldn't help waiting to see the fruits of their labour after the weekend.

Most of the Gryffindors were still not on speaking terms with him, except the members of the Quidditch team, his friends, and Ginny. The Slytherins, however, continued to treat him well, much to the amusement of Lupin. He reminded Harry that this was unprecedented in the History of Hogwarts.

On the morning of Harry's formal introduction to the Magical society, a small group of students were allowed to go home since they would be accompanying their parents to the Potter Mansion.

Dobby took Harry and Hermione to the Potter Mansion. Upon their arrival, the new mistress and master of the house were swept into a whirlwind of activities. Hermione was taken away by the second in command, Gareth, so that she could finalise the details preceding the ball that night. Harry, on the other hand, was taken by Charles to do several important tasks like establishing the new blood wards in the Potter Mansion.

A large surge of magical energy surged through the house when the blood ward was established. The household burst into a loud applause when they saw that the large drape that hung prominently between the two large stairs reflected the new change. The emblem turned gold and Harry's name was reflected at the bottom of the Potter's Crest.

It was soon approaching evening and Harry was led to his bedroom to change into his formal outfit. Harry could not recognise the reflection in the mirror as he stared into it. The person in the mirror looked elegant and poised. The simple black tuxedo fitted the lean body perfectly and his short black hair was neat. Harry had decided to choose a black tuxedo that bore the Potter Crest instead of a dress robe because he felt it best suited him. His stomach felt queasy as he thought of greeting all his guests. Charles had informed him a few moments before that the guests had begun to fill up the place. Taking a deep breath, he tried to relax a little. There was a polite knock on his door.

"Please come in," said Harry as he checked his appearance again.

"My Lord, are you ready?" Dobby asked as he walked in. Dobby was garbed in formal attire that also bore the Potter crest. Harry wore the ring of the Head of the Ancient and Noble House of Potter.

"I think so. Do you think I look alright?" He asked nervously as he adjusted his bow tie.

Dobby told him he was perfect.

This is it, he thought nervously as he adjusted his bow tie for the final time.

Don't worry, love. You'll be great. Hermione assured through their link, as she sensed his apprehension. I'll see you downstairs.

He took a deep breath and walked out of his room with Dobby trailing behind him. He needed to do only one thing - welcome his guests. Everyone grew silent when the House elf had begun speaking. "Ladies and Gentlemen, it is my honour to present Harry James Potter, Lord Gryffindor, Head of the Ancient and Noble House of Potter."

Harry kept his head up and gracefully descended down the stairs that ended in a wide landing in the middle as he felt all eyes on him. He stood at the intersection of the pair regal staircases, in front of a large bright red drape with a large golden Potter Crest in the middle, so that all his guests could see and hear him. Applause erupted when he stood there. He looked at the sea of formally dressed people in front of him and his knees shook slightly.

"Good evening Minister, Distinguished Lords and Ladies, honoured guests," Harry greeted formally with a bright smile. "I would like to welcome you to Potter Mansion, seat of the Ancient and Noble House of Potter, and to this inaugural event. I want to thank you for taking the time to celebrate with me as I formally take my place as Lord Gryffindor. I hope I will be able to uphold the great tradition of service of my esteemed ancestors and make my own mark on Wizarding Society. Most of all, I wish that you will enjoy yourself tonight." Harry

paused and looked for Charles' signal. "Without further ado, let the festivities begin! The dining room is now open." He concluded simply. After another round of applause, the house elves immediately began to attend to the guests and ushered them into the other room.

Well done, my love.

Harry smiled in relief as he heard Hermione's voice in his head. I can't wait to see you. Where are you?

You have duties to attend to. Hermione reminded. We'll see each other soon enough.

Harry headed to where Charles was standing. "Thank you for everything, Charles. Please help me to convey my thanks to the other elves once this event is done." Harry smiled at the house elf warmly "I believe it's time for me to start mingling with the guests?" He asked as he searched the room.

"It was my honour to assist, my lord." Charles replied while bowing deeply. Yes, it is time. I'm sure Dobby will be able to guide you. I've got to attend to the kitchen."

"Please don't let me hold you up." Harry answered. Charles bowed again and disappeared with a 'crack'. He spotted Minister Fudge, wearing his usual bowler hat, standing near the entrance of the dining room talking to another person. Harry walked down the stairs and approached him when "Good evening Minister, thank you so much for coming." Harry greeted sincerely with a polite smile.

"Good evening, Ha- I mean Lord Gryffindor. How could I miss the event of the year? Everyone has been talking about it." Fudge said excitedly. "I was surprised to learn that you'd decided to leave the confines of Hogwarts despite the dangers you face." He continued gravely.

Harry raised his eyebrows in surprise, "Oh? I wasn't aware that I was in any danger," answered Harry simply as he handed a beverage to the Minister from a passing tray before taking a drink for himself. "Please enlighten me."

Fudge fidgeted nervously. "I'm sure that this is neither the proper time nor place to talk about this. However, I'm sure you've heard about Sirius Black?" He said in a low voice as if he was afraid of being overheard.

Harry kept an expression of mild surprise on his face. "Naturally, he's been all over the news. I wasn't aware that his escape had anything to do with me."

"This is confidential. I visited him a few days before he escaped. He was muttering 'he's at Hogwarts'. Given his history, it's not surprising that he would come after you."

"You've confused me, Minister. I was only aware that he went to Azkaban for murdering thirteen people on the streets. I'm not the reason why he was imprisoned. It's hard to imagine why he would want to go after my blood." Harry replied simply.

Fudge peered around checking if anyone would overhear him. In an almost inaudible whisper, Fudge said. "He was a supporter You-Know-Who. He betrayed your parents and led them to their death."

"I see. Nevertheless, I'm sure I'll be protected here, Minister. Thank you for worrying about my safety." Harry assured cordially. "Please don't let me keep you, help yourself to the food." Harry said graciously. He nodded at the house elf hovering beside the Minister of Magic and he immediately showed him to the dining room, where a lavish buffet was set up. Glancing around restlessly, he spotted the person he'd wanted to see all evening. A loving smile touched his lips as he gazed at her.

For the night, she had decided to wear a simple, pink dress that clung nicely to the curves of her body. He whistled as he admired her looks and her deportment. She looked ravishing. Her brown wavy hair was pulled up into a chignon, highlighting the extravagant necklace that her father had given to her on her wedding day - a stunning choker with sparkling rubies. His duties could wait for a moment. Harry hurriedly walked towards her. Hermione was standing at the corner of the room, speaking to Neville, who was dressed in a simple and

timeless black dress robe with the crest of the Noble House of Longbottom.

“Good evening, my lady.” Harry crooned as he bowed deeply. An excited smile spread across her lips when she saw him. He took her hand and lovingly pressed a kiss to it. His lips lingered on her hand longer than necessary. Hermione smiled affectionately in return. “I must say that you look stunning.” He praised.

Her cheeks turned slightly red. “You look pretty dashing yourself, my Lord.” She answered shyly. Harry chuckled in amusement as he turned to his friend. He greeted him cordially.

“Good evening, Nev. You look sharp.” He grinned playfully as Neville reddened. “If you two will excuse me, I have to get back out there. I was distracted by a certain somebody here. I still need to greet several families.” Harry continued. “Do I look okay?” He asked worriedly.

Evening attire befitting a Lord. Hermione smiled tenderly as she moved closer to him. Hermione frowned slightly in concentration as she adjusted his silky bow tie properly.

You’re so adorable, he thought as he admired his wife.

“Now you’re perfect, Lord Debonair.” She said teasingly. “Good luck, Harry.”

“Thanks, I’ll be back.” Harry said. He couldn’t resist giving Hermione a peck on the cheek before he left with Dobby.

“Who should I meet next?” Harry asked nervously as he searched the large dining room. He had invited every magical family to his place so the vast room was filled with people in small clusters, holding small plates of hors de oeuvres, and conversing lightly.

“The Head of the Ancient and Noble House of Greengrass and his family, my lord.” Dobby answered as he led his master through the crowd. He saw his new friend immediately. She looked outstanding wearing a gown of royal blue that exposed her creamy shoulders. An

imposing but dignified middle-aged man and a beautiful lady stood next to her. He had no doubt they were her parents, Lord Oswald Greengrass and his lady. Harry mustered his courage and approached the trio. "Good evening, Lord and Lady Greengrass. I hope the food is to your liking," said Harry genially as he greeted them.

"Yes, it's excellent, Lord Potter. I must say that you've done a good job in establishing control over the Potter Mansion." Lord Greengrass answered with a warm smile. Harry relaxed immediately when he felt his genuine kindness.

"There really hasn't been too much effort on my part, I'm afraid. I'm blessed to have a team of efficient house elves under me." He admitted. He turned to Daphne. "Good evening, Daphne. You look lovely tonight," complimented Harry as he bowed. He picked her hand and gallantly brushed his lips briefly across her knuckles.

"I had no idea that you two were already acquainted." Lord Greengrass continued as he looked at them. "It's a pleasant surprise."

"We met by a stroke of luck, Daddy, bonding over owls of all things. We cause a minor uproar when we became friends." Daphne answered as she smiled. "By the way, that was very chivalrous of you, Harry." Daphne added, referring to his greeting to her. The older Greengrass were shocked to see their usually stoic daughter smile.

"I'm certain that you did. Historically, Slytherins and Gryffindors have never gotten along with each other. You're a definitely true Potter – the Potters tend to stir things up wherever they go. I'm sure that both of you must get along well enough to evoke that kind of tumult." Lord Greengrass said as he chuckled lightly.

"We found that we have identical interests, Lord Greengrass." Harry answered. "I think the whole pandemonium cemented our friendship." He smiled in amusement as he glanced at Daphne.

"That's great to know. I'm sure that you're familiar with the History of the Potters because of Charles. Ever since the pact was made a long

time ago, the four Ancient and Noble Families have always been close. This is something that even Daphne isn't aware of because of certain circumstances, but I'm glad that this relationship won't end with your generation." He answered simply. "In fact, James, your father, was the younger brother that I never had. I carried him when he was still a baby since I'm ten years his senior. I know you've heard this many times, but you looked exactly like your father when he was at your age, well except for the eyes. You've definitely got your mother's eyes." Lord Greengrass continued affectionately as he looked at him.

Harry knew that the four Ancient Houses were connected because of a pact that bound them. However, he had no idea they were this close. The Greengrasses were seen as a dark family but they remained neutral during the war. He felt as if there were a lot of contradiction in Lord Oswald's words. His brows knitted into a frown as he tried to come into terms with what he'd heard. It still didn't make sense to him and he had plenty of questions to ask.

Daphne and her mother, sensing that the two Lords needed some time alone, excused themselves to speak to the other guests.

"If my father was like a brother to you, why is it that you've never helped him during the war?" Harry posed curiously.

"That's a long tale." He added solemnly. "I think its best if we speak of this in detail some other time. We might not be able to finish the tale if we start tonight. I can tell you that the deceased Lord Bones, your father, Sirius Black, and I were very close in the past. Personally, I was shocked when I didn't receive custody of you immediately after your parents' passing. James would've definitely given the custody of his child to the Head of one of the other Ancient Houses. Since Lord Bones had passed away and the last remaining Black was in Azkaban, it should've been my responsibility to take you in and raise you as my own. However, Dumbledore claimed that your mother, Lily, had written in her will specifying that you must remain with her muggle sister. I was suspicious of the validity at the time it since I was sure that they would entrust your care to us. However, Dumbledore made it clear that this was your mother's wish and I respected your mother. " Lord Greengrass explained.

It was too much for Harry to swallow. Dumbledore had denied him the opportunity to be raised in a family who wanted him and condemned him to years of suffering.

“My parents did entrust me to someone - they made Sirius Black my godfather so that he could care for me if something were to happen to them. Did you believe that he'd have betrayed my parents to Voldemort?” Harry enquired.

The eyes of the aged Lord became stormy blue with emotions. With a sombre tone, he replied, “Never. Not Sirius. I still find it hard to believe. His case was closed before it could even be tried. They claimed that there was no way to refute the charges. I had no evidence to prove otherwise.”

Harry deliberated for a moment. He knew that because of the pact that the four Ancient Houses made in the past, they were not allowed to do anything to harm one another. He sensed he could trust him. “I've found new evidence. He is innocent.”

Lord Oswald's eyes immediately lit up. “You can't be serious,” he said in disbelief. Seeing that Harry's face was grave, he announced, “Wait, we must inform her. She has to know about this.” He quickly searched the large dining room for someone. The room was crowded and they took a while to find her. Harry could guess who he was looking for - Lady Bones. Lord Greengrass and Harry cut through the crowd in the direction of a formidable looking lady, standing next to a girl he recognised from his year. Amelia Bones, Head of DMLE or Lady Bones, was speaking to several other adults. When she saw Lord Greengrass approaching her, her gaze turned icy immediately. Tension mounted when the two Heads greeted each other. He watched the two adults in confusion.

His schoolmate smiled at him shyly before excusing herself from their company.

“Good evening, Lord Potter. I'm pleased finally meet you.” She said with a warm smile on her face when she turned to face Harry.

“Good evening, Lady Bones.” Harry returned cordially.

Lord Greengrass immediately whipped out his wand and cast a spell to prevent others from eavesdropping on their conversation. Lady Bones’ eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“I know you’ve never forgiven me, Am. However, we have something important to discuss with you. It’s about Sirius Black. Harry believes Sirius is not guilty of what he’s been accused of. Harry, tell us about the new evidence you’ve found.”

Harry began to share everything in detail as the two adults listened attentively. At the end, Lady Bones and Lord Greengrass were thrilled. “I think that might be enough to appeal for a trial of the case.” She commented as she smiled.

“Yes, especially if we can capture that rat. We must discuss all of this in detail. You said that Professor McGonagall is in the know?” Lord Greengrass questioned.

“Yes, Lord Greengrass.”

“That’s way too formal. Just call me Uncle Oswald, Harry. I mean I was close to your father.” He smiled warmly.

“Harry, you may call me Aunt Amelia as well. I was also very close to both Sirius and James. We were all the same age.” She added affectionately. “I was never part of the Marauders, but I knew all of them. If you really want to know about your parents, I can always share memories some of my memories with you. Anyway, I never would’ve expected that Pettigrew would be the one to betray them. We must take him in for questioning soon.”

“Yes, we need to come up with an effective plan to capture the rat and get his case tried. Lady Bones and I can be counted on to present it to the Wizengamot. Harry, you need to make sure that you catch the rat and bring him to us. I think my daughter and Amelia’s niece can assist you since all of you are in the same year.” Lord Greengrass said as he rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Yes, Susan can definitely help you. I've heard from her that you and Daphne are now friends?" Lady Bones asked.

Harry smiled. "Yes, we are. I'll be glad to be given the opportunity to get to know her better since I've heard that the children of the four Ancient Houses have traditionally grown up together."

"Yes, for several generations. It was no different for my generation. We knew and treasured each other. Well, generally." She said as she cast a dirty look at Lord Greengrass.

She must have touched a nerve because Lord Greengrass hotly responded. "James, Sirius, and William were important to me, Am. Especially Will, since he was the same age as me. I was upset to learn that he had been murdered." He said.

Her nostrils had turned white at his statement. "Upset? You didn't do anything avenge his death. You maintained your neutral stance and went on with your business. If you were upset, you could have cut off all trade with the supporters of the Dark Lord. It could've crippled them before they killed James and Lily."

"Greengrasses are businessmen. We've never interfered with political issues because it makes it complicated for us to do our business. After all, it's our responsibility to ensure that the economy does not come to a standstill. Our families decided to take a neutral stand from the beginning. I didn't know that he would come after James and Lily."

"In a nutshell, you were more concerned about making profits rather than the well-being of your brothers." Lady Bones scoffed.

"Most of your parents were still the Head of the Houses back then. I was already Head of the family. You know that the old Lord Black was pro-Voldemort because of his wife's influence. In fact, Regulus himself became a death eater. The pact doesn't allow us to go against each other. So, the other Heads of the family could only declare that our stance was neutral even though we didn't like Voldemort and his cronies. After all, Lord Black refused to listen to us. William and James were not compelled to make this stand because

they were not the heads of the family at that point. They were able to oppose him openly.

"You could've opposed them when Lord Black died from the guilt." She added.

"The new Lord Black was Regulus, remember? He killed himself after Voldemort died. There was never a chance for me to oppose them." He added sadly. "I know I could have helped to end Voldemort's reign early. If I had done that, maybe James and Lily would be still here." Lord Greengrass added sadly.

Lady Bones said naught and left.

Harry understood the animosity she bore for Lord Greengrass. However, he also understood his point of view. Lord Greengrass was bound by the pact made by their forefathers. Moreover, it wasn't prudent to offend an organisation that was primed to be the next government because it would pose a lot of problems to him and the society. He was the biggest merchant, holding a significant control over the economy of Magical Britain. Many social problems would arise if the government decided to be difficult to him.

"We lost a lot of people in the war. Your grandparents died from guilt. They saw your parents' death as their fault. That, plus the pain of knowing that their brother's family was nearly wiped out by the same person sent them to their grave. Lord Black and his wife were already dead by then." He said sombrely. The lines of age on his face became more evident as he talked about the past.

Harry felt upset. Voldemort was the main reason he was denied love since he was young.

"If I were given a second chance, I'd go against Voldemort for all the pain he caused." He continued with determination. "Despite what happened, I believe that he's still lurking out there somewhere. I don't think there enough human left in him to be killed by a simple killing curse."

Before Harry could say something, he noticed that most of the guests were being ushered into the ballroom. They were going to start the dancing soon.

"I think it's about time to start the ball. As host, you must have the first dance." Lord Greengrass smiled. "Good luck, Harry."

"Yes, you are right. Thank you for the information, Uncle Oswald." Harry answered. "Please excuse me. I need to look for my companions." He had no problems searching for his wife amidst the crowds. Neville, Luna, Daphne were with her.

Hermione was watching him from the moment he started making his way towards them. He knew that Hermione had sensed his misery from the way she was looking at him with concern. His spirits lifted up immediately when he saw her standing there, his beautiful and wonderful wife.

"Hermione," said Harry with a loving smile plastered on his face, "Would you honour me with this dance?" Harry extended his hand towards her and waited for her response.

She nodded. He led her to the centre of the ballroom, looking at her as if she was everything to him. Hermione could not tear her eyes off her husband who adored her as much as she did him. The moment Harry and Hermione walked to the centre of the room, the orchestra immediately struck up a melodic waltz.

He slipped his arm around her waist and held her hand in one fluid motion as they moved closer to each other. Worry was written on the slight creases on her brow as they began to dance. "I'm fine." He whispered softly.

"You were upset, Harry. What happened?" She asked with deep concern. Harry gently pulled her to him and lowered her as she did a dip. She felt his warm breath on her face when he answered.

"I was upset when I discovered Tom was the reason why I never had the chance to experience love from my Grandparents or even my 'extended family'. I realised that Dumbledore pretty much did the

same thing by sending me to the Dursleys.” Harry explained with a sigh. “My desolation faded away when I saw you. I might have been denied the love of a family when I was young but now I have you.” Harry lifted her up and continued waltzing. Tears were in her eyes as Hermione watched him with unadulterated affection. There was no need for words or thoughts to express their love for each other.

The guests gathered around to watch the new Lord dance with his chosen companion. Entranced by their gracefulness and the perfect cohesion that the couple shared, none of the guests had blinked their eyes as they watched them elegantly twirl around the room. Anyone in the room could see that from the way they gazed at each other how much they meant to each other despite their young age. It was a stirring sight and most of the guests became lost in their own memories of their own early romances.

The beauty of sweet young love, Lord Greengrass thought as he watched them closely. He didn't expect that Harry would be such a wonderful dancer. He knew that he wasn't Harry's father but he heartily approved of his choice of girlfriend. James and Lily would be delighted if they were still here. James and Lily, he thought aching. They'd do anything just to have the chance to see their son so happy. It looks like he's already found somebody, Jamie, but it isn't Daphne. So much of a wistful thinking on your part. I guess we were all already a family without inter-marriages. He spotted someone dressed in tartan green standing on the outskirts of the crowd and walked over to speak to her.

The song ended soon and other couples began to join them at the floor. Harry immediately led Hermione to the side.

“What skills don't the both of you possess?” Daphne asked harshly. A bright smile cracked her façade and her faux- annoyance faded away. “You two were brilliant.” She continued. Harry and Hermione laughed brightly.

“Thank you, Daphne.” Harry answered as he grinned. Neville was patiently teaching Luna how to dance. The sight made him smile since it reminded him of their wedding night. “Did you know that

we've been tasked by your father to find the rat? Aunt Amelia will be asking Susan to help us out."

"That's great to hear. It means that the four families can be together again. You should introduce Hermione to my parents and Lady Bones soon, lest they attempt to become matchmakers." She added. "By the way, my father approves."

Harry smiled warmly. "That's great to know. I must find the chance to introduce Hermione to him soon. Anyway, I need to speak to the other guests." He said when he spotted Dobby approaching him. "I shouldn't have invited so many people." He grumbled as he walked off.

He managed to complete his task quickly since he approached them while they were still in groups. Technically, he was of a higher rank, so he didn't need to greet them individually. Harry felt awkward when he spoke to a courteous Lucius Malfoy. After all, Harry was his son's saviour and a Lord of one of the four Ancient and Noble Houses, so Malfoy couldn't afford to be rude. He also spoke to Neville's formidable grandmother and Luna's interesting father. He found that he liked the parents of his friends. Molly Weasley was trying to mother him as usual, but with the strained relationship with the two sons, it was difficult for him to reciprocate with much warmth. She had a reason to treat him well since he was a good friend of her youngest son a month back. However, she no longer had the reason to. The previous words of Malfoy played in his mind as he interacted with her.

What if this was a part of a carefully crafted plan to gain the trust of the Boy-who-lived? Harry kept their conversation brief. He spoke to Dumbledore after he finished speaking to everyone. With all evidence stressing Dumbledore's manipulative nature, Harry dreaded spending any time with him. They didn't converse for long before Lady Bones saved him by dragging him off to him to meet her niece.

Harry had seen the redhead many times in school but he never had the opportunity to get to know Susan. Lady Bones left them alone so that they could use the time to learn more about each other. She wasn't in awe of his fame and his position in Magical society the way most girls would be. He found her easy to get along with.

"I'm glad that someone is making effort to make friends from other houses. I think it's very brave of you to do that, especially since the rest of the Gryffindors are against it. I don't think I'd be able to do it if I were you." Susan said as she smiled meekly.

"This is precisely why the sorting hat didn't put you in Gryffindor. You don't look as if you are foolish enough to jump into places where angels fear to tread." Harry joked and Susan laughed. "I'm surprised that you actually support my actions. I had the impression that most people would not want to move out of their conclave." Harry continued.

"Plenty of my friends feel that way. However, like you, I feel that we are foremost students of Hogwarts." Susan answered simply. "You and Granger dance very well. It looks as if you both have been dancing together all your lives."

"That's nice of you to say – I'm sure you exaggerate. Hermione has always been a good dancer since she really loves to dance. I'm just forced to master it so that I don't look like the clumsy guy with two left feet standing beside her." Harry returned. "Why don't you come with me and I'll introduce you to the group?" He asked suddenly.

"I don't think that they'd like it–"

"Nonsense, I think they'd be excited to have a real Hufflepuff in their midst." He grinned as he led her to them. Neville and Luna had returned and stood with Hermione and Daphne. Neville's face was bright red from the exertion. Harry introduced the meek Hufflepuff to the others. Everyone had genially greeted her. Neville had blushed when Luna had quipped that it was great to meet a real Hufflepuff finally. The rest had roared in laughter. Susan looked really baffled until Hermione explained the joke and she laughed.

"I think as Lord Gryffindor, you need to dance with several other ladies before you can call it a day." Daphne reminded.

"Alright then," said Harry obediently. He realised that Daphne and Susan had not had the chance to dance. "Would you like to dance

with me?" Harry asked as he extended his hand to Daphne. She laughed brightly.

"I don't mind being the tool to finish your duty, Potter." She said as she placed her hand on his. Harry led her away.

"I hope you're a proficient dancer." Harry joked as he slipped his arm around her waist and held her hand as they danced. He was surprised that Daphne could follow his lead smoothly. "I suppose its part of your upbringing."

"Naturally, Potter, especially when you're the daughter of one of the oldest and most influential families." Daphne replied haughtily before smiling.

"Harry, I have this feeling that you're hiding things from everyone. You and Hermione are more than just a dating couple right?" She said suddenly. Harry was taken aback that she'd sensed that and gaped momentarily. It was enough to confirm her suspicion.

"What makes you think so?"

"It's the way you act with each other. The feelings you have for each other appear to be more developed and intense than the simple love between a dating couple."

"You're uncannily observant and great at putting two and two together." Harry grinned.

"I'm not as perceptive as Luna though nor am I as intelligent as Hermione." Daphne added.

"Well, of course not, since you're comparing yourself to a Ravenclaw and the smartest witch of our time." Harry said as he chuckled brightly.

"Have you ever thought the reason why I'm in Slytherin is because I'm more ambitious than clever? I could be more intelligent than a

Ravenclaw but I wasn't placed there simply because I have a greater thirst to excel?" Daphne queried as she quirked a brow.

This made Harry laugh even more. "I have no doubt that you're a true Slytherin, Daphne. I mean that was a very Slytherinish way of putting things."

"Why, thank you, Lord Potter." Daphne added in mock annoyance. "Do you need me to curtsy for the wonderful compliment?"

Both of them laughed companionably.

Harry had an enjoyable time dancing with all his female friends. Susan was not a brilliant dancer but he had fun talking to her as they spun around the room. He could see her as part of his small circle of friends. He was tickled when he saw the similarity between Luna and himself when they first started dancing. He didn't mind it when she had accidentally stepped on his feet but smiled indulgently. He lost count of the number of times he had stepped on Hermione's feet. In general, Luna fared well for a first timer.

When he and Luna rejoined his friends, Harry was surprised to see that Hermione and Susan were talking. Harry knew that she never really had any female friends before. Within a short span of about a month, it seemed that she was going to have three very good female friends.

The night was drawing to a close. He was glad to see that all the guests had enjoyed themselves. Most of them were dreading the end of the evening since it had been a long time since they'd had such a large enjoyable social event. Most of them were still going strong and it looked as if they would only leave at midnight. However, the star of the day was looking forward for the end of this night since the main highlight of his week would only begin once the clock strikes twelve.

After all, when the clock strikes twelve, it would be September 19th.

A/N:Hi, hope everyone has a great week. The story will strictly stay as H/Hr. There will be no romances between Harry and the other characters. Thank you for taking the time to review. By the way, I've

edited the previous chapter. I didn't like the idea of Harry and Hermione killing. Thank you frustr8dwriter for editing my chapters. Please tell me how you feel about the new chapter.

Chapter 13

beta-read by frustr8dwriter

All the guests began to leave just before midnight. Harry dutifully did his job as a hospitable host. He stood at the door, thanking all his guests personally for taking their time to attend this event with a warm smile plastered on his face. Meanwhile, an army of diligent House elves marched into the large Mansion and began the massive task of putting everything back to order.

A few moments earlier, Harry had asked Lord Greengrass and Lady Bones to wait for him in his study.

“Uncle Oswald and Aunt Amelia, can I have a word with both of you for a minute?” Harry asked as he approached them quietly. Lord Greengrass and Lady Bones were mildly surprised by his gesture but they followed him to his study.

“Please have a seat,” said Harry as he gestured them to the large comfortable armchairs littered around the room. Lord Greengrass remembered this room, he used to spend countless hours in the same room, discussing about plans with the elder Lord Potter, Lord Black and Lord Bones. He sat in a familiar chair and took a good look around the study. Nothing has changed since those times, he thought devastatingly as the memories of the past haunted him.

“I was hoping that you would wait here until after I have said goodbye to the rest of my guests. There is something I’d like to discuss with you.” Harry explained. Upon getting an agreement from the pair, he went on. “Would you like some refreshments while you wait? It may take a little while to see all the guests off. But, please make yourself feel at home. You may summon Dobby if you should need anything.” Harry said. Satisfied that his guests looked quite at ease, he left the room to do his duty.

“Do you think Harry wants to introduce us to that wonderful girl he danced with?” Lord Greengrass said warmly, in his attempt to break the ice.

"Perhaps," answered Lady Bones curtly and coolly. The distinct contrast of their attitudes made it uncomfortable for Lord Greengrass.

"Am, I'm sorry I didn't turn out to be the brother you wanted me to be. Believe me - Wills, Jamie, and Sirius were all important to me. I wish that I could've done more, but the pact restricted me from taking any action. I couldn't openly oppose Voldemort because most of the Blacks supported him. Perhaps all of this could've been avoided if I had paid more attention to Regulus." Lord Greengrass admitted emotionally.

"Regulus always had a mind of his own, yet he was always his Mummy's boy. It wasn't just you. We didn't want to associate with most of the Blacks except Sirius. I thought he was most like Lord Black - fun and easy to get along with." Lady Bones acknowledged. "You've given me some food for thought, Os. But I will need more time to reconcile how I feel with what you've told me."

"Thank you, Am." Lord Greengrass replied gratefully.

Hermione was a bundle of nerves as she walked towards the study with Harry by her side. She knew that Harry wanted to formally introduce her to the two other Heads of the Ancient Houses.

There was an assuring smile on Harry's lips as he looked at her. "Everything will be alright. Just be yourself. They can't help but like you." He whispered softly. Hermione did a final check on her appearance and fixed a warm smile on her face. Harry knocked the door and led her in.

The two Heads of the families looked at her approvingly as the couple walked into the room. They saw exactly what she wanted them to see - a confident and poised young lady.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting." Harry smiled sincerely as he and Hermione stood in front of them. "Uncle Oswald and Aunt Amelia, I want to introduce you to the most important person in my life. This young lady is my wife, Hermione." Harry said proudly. He had an affectionate grin on his face as he shot a fleeting look at his wife.

The two Heads were awestruck; never did they imagine that Harry would be married at such a tender age.

“Good evening, Lady Bones and Lord Greengrass. It’s such a pleasure to meet you.” Hermione said meekly.

A look of realisation appeared on his face briefly before he exclaimed with child-like exhilaration, “You two are soul mates!” Lord Greengrass chuckled. “Wow!”

Lady Bones addressed her politely, with eyebrows furrowed into a frown at Oswald’s lack of manners. “You may address me as Aunt Amelia, Hermione. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” She said amicably. “I should’ve have guessed the nature of your relationship from the way you gaze at each other.”

“I apologise for my outburst,” said Lord Greengrass with a fatherly smile after he composed himself. “It would figure that James’ son would find his mate at such an early age. In any case, you may call me Uncle Oswald. It’s wonderful to meet you, Hermione.” Lord Greengrass said. “Or should I address you as Lady Gryffindor?” He added teasingly.

“If you persist in addressing me as Lady Gryffindor, then I must address you as Lord Greengrass,” Hermione replied with exaggerated politeness. Her eyes twinkled mischievously as she answered. Harry was relieved to feel the grip she had on his arm had relaxed.

Lord Greengrass chortled with delight. “Welcome to the family, Hermione. I’ve actually heard a lot about you from Daphne. I think you’ll be brilliant as Lady Gryffindor,” said Lord Greengrass sincerely. “I suppose we’ll have to keep this a secret, Harry?” He said shrewdly as he turned to look at him.

Harry and Hermione laughed. “Yes, Uncle Oswald. I don’t want the news of our soul bond to be spread to the Magical society – at least not yet.”

"Then it shall be a secret between the families." Aunt Amelia concluded. "Is it alright for Daphne and Susan to know of it?"

"We'll be telling them soon. Daphne has already guessed that something wasn't quite right with our relationship."

"It is natural for the people around you to notice since they spend the most time with you. You don't have to worry about the guests; most of them will simply think that the intensity is normal for a budding teenage romance." Lord Greengrass assured.

The blindness of the aristocrats to the obvious was a trademark of pureblood families since they hardly noticed anyone but themselves. Harry and Hermione were convinced that the other Head of the families could not have discovered their secret.

"Well, back to the issue at hand, I supposed Susan and Daphne have already learned Occlumency?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, of course. It's a skill that most pureblooded families teach their children, especially children of Ancient and Noble Houses. You can call us paranoid about our privacy if you wish." Lord Greengrass responded with an indifferent shrug.

"Yes, children of the nobility tend to master Occlumency before they even attend school, " Lady Bones agreed. "They're also taught to raise the issue to relevant authorities when someone attempts to read their mind illegally."

"That's good to know." Harry answered with a warm smile.

"Yes it is. I'm certain that no one would even attempt to read your mind, Harry. You're a Lord now. It's a much greater offense. Well, it's getting late so we had best be going. I know that everything seem so new and intimidating right now, but we will both do what we can to help you along the way. The four houses traditionally stand as one, so you will not have to stand alone. You can concentrate on your schooling while we handle the rest." Lady Bones added.

"You'll always have us standing by you." Lord Greengrass promised.

“By the way, I heard that Daphne is staying over tonight because all of you are going out tomorrow. Would you mind if Susan joins you?” Lady Bones inquired. “I have business to attend to tomorrow and would rather that she not be alone at home.”

“Oh no, she’s more than welcome to join us. It would be our pleasure.” Harry answered with a warm smile. Everyone liked Susan very much. Harry and Hermione were pleased that things between the Bones matriarch and the Greengrass patriarch were starting to get better. At the very least, Aunt Amelia was allowing her niece to socialize with Daphne.

His newfound Uncle and Aunt promised to have a private get together soon so that they could catch up with him. Hermione was glad that they had accepted her as his wife. She had stepped into her role of Lady of the House after the guests left and supervised with Gareth the work the House elves were doing.

Harry took the opportunity to check with Charles about the activities that would take place the next day.

“Charles, is everything prepared for tomorrow? Have our overnight guests settled down for the evening?” Harry asked as he looked at the head house elf. “By the way, thank you for putting so much effort into tonight’s festivities.”

“Yes, my lord. Everything has been prepared and your guests liked their accommodations. Dobby will bring your other important guests to the mansion in time for the celebration. We are very happy to have a chance to be busy, sir. It’s in our nature to enjoy hard work.” Charles answered.

“I hope not too hard.” Harry replied with a smile. “Ask the staff to get some rest early, please. Also, please convey my sincere thanks to all House elves for tonight’s success. The guests seemed to have enjoyed themselves immensely. I owe this accomplishment to all of your efforts.” Harry declared sincerely before he strode up to his room.

“Yes, I will, my lord. I hope that you will have an early night as well.”

The large room was luxuriously furnished. He found it peculiar not seeing any evidence of feminine influence in the bedroom. Hermione and Harry had been sharing a bedroom since they were married thus he was accustomed to see her personal items scattered around the bedroom. This was not the case at the Potter Mansion since Hermione had taken residence in the room connected to his. Apparently, that was the traditional arrangement for all wealthy couples. He opened his wardrobe, once again noting the absence of female clothing in it as he selected his nightclothes. He mentally noted to inform Charles to change this arrangement in the morning.

Hermione wearily dragged herself to her room. It had been a long week for her and the thought of it ending brought a smile to her lips. She was certain that Harry shared the same sentiments - she could feel his fatigue. Harry was sitting on the bed reading when she entered her room. "Why aren't you asleep? It's very late." Hermione questioned as she walked to the dresser and began to remove the pins from her hair. Her lips curved in appreciation when she felt his hands on her head. Harry was gently taking out those troublesome pins.

"I thought you probably needed help with this," answered Harry as he continued removing the pins. "Thank you so much for everything you've done to make this night such a success. Did you think I wouldn't notice that you'd had a hand in most of the preparation?" He continued as he grinned at her affectionately.

"I'm the lady of the house after all. There's no way that I wouldn't pitch in," replied Hermione. "I can't believe how complex it is to run a household. I don't know what I would've done if Gareth and Charles weren't there to guide me." She continued.

There was an exaggerated look of shock on Harry's face. "I'm surprised that there's something the smartest witch of our time can't do." He teased, receiving a slap on the chest from her. Harry chortled brightly from her reaction. "No worries, we have a long time to learn the ropes together. Some of the bigots are convinced that I must marry a pureblood so that I won't disgrace myself in the future. I was surprised that Malfoy didn't say a word."

A frown came across her face. "So do you feel the same way?" She asked hesitantly. "It's obvious that pure-blood wizards seemed to be more knowledgeable in such circumstances and least likely to--"

"Hermione Jane Potter," interrupted Harry. "I think you've been doing an excellent job. Look, even Uncle Oswald thinks you'll be brilliant as Lady Gryffindor. In any case, I don't want to marry a pure-blood witch because I'm already married to the one person I want to spend the rest of my life with -- I married you." Harry added resolutely. "We are soul mates and I know what you're thinking - I don't like Daphne that way."

"You've never noticed any girls until--"

"I'm at that age, Hermione," added Harry as he crossed his arms in front of his chest. "I couldn't help getting a hormonal reaction when I really saw her for the first time." His arms relaxed to his side as he continued, "You weren't there. It was embarrassing. Daphne, for a moment, thought I harboured a crush on her until I told her that I was happy with you. We got along after that--"

"Oh--" The frown on her face ceased at the statement and she relaxed visibly.

"- You can feel my emotions and hear my thoughts. I'm sure that you'd know it if I really did like someone else." He concluded. In an afterthought, "Though, I don't know if that's even possible," added Harry.

Hermione shrugged nonchalantly as she averted her eyes from him and became still. "So it is possible?" Harry spoke more of a statement than a question.

She nodded reluctantly. "I asked Edmund about it. He said that although he made all the conditions optimal for soul mates to be together but ultimately, it's still up to the couple."

"I think Edmund may have hinted at something along those lines sometime ago. Well, it's not a complete surprise, anyway. A few days

ago, I arrived at a certain conclusion, no doubt under the influence of my brilliant wife, that feelings can't simply be created and they have to be cultivated. I asked myself, why would Edmund have to tie a knot of Fate between a soul-bonded couple? It is to give them the opportunity to develop those feelings. Following that line of logic, it makes sense that those feelings can fade if we don't spend enough time together." He concluded with a teasing smile, expecting a well-due hit on his arm for imitating his wife but it did not come.

Sensing that his wife was upset with his revelation, he lowered himself to her height so that they could look at each other eye to eye. Hermione reflexively turned her gaze away from him since she didn't want to share her feelings with him. She knew that she couldn't hide anything from him when he looked into her eyes.

"Sweetheart," began Harry fondly as he stroked her alabaster cheeks. "I know you worry that we'll fall out of love with each other because we don't have the time to spend with each other." Harry said as he watched her lovingly. "I promise you that'll never happen. It would be impossible for me not to love you," Harry chuckled lightly at how silly he was going to sound but he was glad that he had her undivided attention- she looked at him thoughtfully, waiting patiently for him to finish his sentence. "I find you more desirable every day."

Blood rush up to her cheeks. He did not miss the gleam of happiness in her eyes before she averted them meekly. "Well... I'm g-growing," commented Hermione lamely. She tossed her hand up when she couldn't find a suitable response to his words.

"I noticed," laughed Harry. That remark earned a whack on his arm. "With each day, your beauty grows, as does my love for you." Harry said as he stood up and placed all the pins on the dresser. "Well, I'm done. You can have your shower now." He turned back and looked at her when he felt her hand on his arm.

They did not break their eye contact as Hermione gracefully stood up. With a distressed voice, she said, "Harry, I know I'm never going to fall out of love with you and I don't think I'll be able to survive if you ever fell in love with another girl. I can't share you. I wouldn't be able

to bear hearing your thoughts, feeling your emotions when you're holding her or kissing her. -"

"I love you, Hermione – and no one else. There isn't anyone in this world I would rather hold or kiss. If you can't survive, neither can I. Our souls are bonded, remember?" Harry answered in a light tone as he adoringly kissed her on her forehead. "It's something you don't have to worry about. Go, and have your shower. It's getting late."

The message was clear - they belonged solely to each other. Hermione nodded gratefully and walked into the adjoining bath.

I feel the same way, Hermione. Harry thought to himself. I'd go crazy if I had to share you with someone else.

Casting that thought away since he unequivocally trusted his wife, Harry went to his room to retrieve a carefully wrapped present and a wooden board. He knew it did not look pleasant since it was his first attempt at wrapping a gift. He chuckled in amusement when he noticed the distorted vase, holding a bunch of bright flowers, sitting on the side table.

The distinctive clay vase was actually made by Hedwig and Crookshanks. Between the two animals, one spun the large wheel by constantly pressing the pedal while the other shaped the clay with its paws, wings or talons. Crookshanks did most of the spinning since it was easier for him to control it. Hedwig shaped the clay prepared by Dobby with her talons and wings. According to her, it was a very difficult task that needed a lot of effort to overcome the barrier of not having any hands or legs. Dobby then placed it in the oven after they were satisfied with it.

Harry remembered the incident clearly since he had to painstakingly clean the snowy owl, feather by feather with a cloth, seeing as she had clay all over her. It was hard work. By the time he was finished with Hedwig, he did not have much time for Crookshanks so he got the shorter end of the stick. Harry levitated him into a tub of soapy water and magically controlled the brush to scrub him clean as Crookshanks hissed loudly in protest. After that torment, he dried the

fuming cat with a drying spell. It was a miracle that Crookshanks did not scratch him, but he did ignore him for the rest of the week.

“That’s a very unique vase, don’t you think?” Hermione asked as she came out of the bathroom towelling her long wavy hair dry. He patted the space beside him and she joined him at the bed.

“Yes it is, darling. Do you know that it wasn’t made by creature with hands?” Harry said as an amused smile fitted his lips. There was a look of bewilderment on her face. “Hedwig and Crookshanks made it for you. Happy birthday!” He beamed as he gave her the wooden board. Her eyes widened in shock as she took the wooden board. Hedwig scratched a message on the board for her. She couldn’t believe that the pets actually made her a present.

“Wow. How did they know that it’s my birthday today?” She asked in puzzlement as she carefully took it into her hands and inspected it. “How do they do it?” she continued as she cautiously turned it around in light and observed the gift. “It’s so beautiful.”

The seemingly imperfection of the vase made it even more striking. She couldn’t even imagine how much effort it took the pets just to make her a simple vase.

“If you have to know, Hedwig did it with her wings and talons when she wasn’t in control of the wheel. Crookshanks used his paws but he mostly spun the wheel,” answered Harry as he grinned. The sight of her being so happy made him contented. “You won’t how dirty they were. I was taken aback when I discovered that my vain little owl didn’t mind getting grubby to make your present.” He said as he wrapped his arms around her waist. Hedwig always made sure that she looked perfect. There was never a stray or offending feather on her since she groomed herself constantly. It remained a surprise to him how she got over that barrier to do something like that for Hermione.

“As for how they knew that information, someone clued them in.”

She gently set the vase down on the side table, spun around in his arms and gazed at him.

"The same way Malfoy clued you in on where my favourite spot in Hogwarts was? I spoke to him today and he admitted to it," said Hermione.

Shrugging indifferently, he said, "I'm busted." He smiled as he took her hand and placed a present on it.

"Happy birthday," said Harry sweetly. "I hope you like it."

Her eyebrows rose in astonishment when she saw that the present was too small to be a book. Harry usually got books for her. She looked at him expectantly, hoping to get a hint from his eyes. He merely smiled and gestured for her to open it.

"I must warn you that the present might not be as good as the one from Hedwig and Crookshanks," said Harry as he watched her closely. Hermione unwrapped the paper carefully and opened the lid. A beautiful, shiny watch nestled in its velvet surrounding. She glanced at Harry. "This is really beautiful. I've wanted a new watch for some time."

"It's more than just a watch," explained Harry with an enigmatic smile. "I spent quite a bit of time modifying it to suit your needs. I know that you miss your parents while we're at school, so now you can use the watch to communicate with your parents or with me. I've installed communication mirrors in their house that the watch can connect to. It also has a built-in organiser. Any data input into the watch will automatically be reflected on the timetable and the to-do-list boards in our quarters and at the House. But I must say the most useful feature of the watch is the two vials of Tears of Phoenix stored in it." He smiled as he took it out of the box and helped Hermione to put it on. It was then she realised that he was wearing an identical watch - only his was slightly larger.

"Thank you, Harry. It's a wonderful gift," said Hermione as she absently pecked him on his lips and went to try out her new gift. Harry smiled in pleasure when he saw that familiar child-like spark in her eyes. He knew she probably wasn't going to sleep until she had tried out all the functions and figure out the mechanics. Hermione

scrutinised her new gift and knew that she would have to try the communication mirror the next morning, so she tried the other features. She gingerly pressed the side button and was shocked to discover that the screen retracted, revealing two vials of the precious liquid. "How long did you take to do this?"

Harry shrugged, "I have no idea – I lost track of the time I spent in the house. I had to build the communication mirrors too. By the way, the watch is virtually indestructible. All of our instructors made sure it was." He smiled as he climbed into their bed. He extended his arm to her and Hermione reluctantly scrambled onto the bed into his arms. She laid her head on his chest as he wrapped his arm around her.

"I haven't–"

"-Shh, it won't run away. You can try everything out tomorrow morning." Harry whispered as he cast a drying spell on her hair before turning the lights off. He buried his head into the glorious mass of brown hair, and allowed that faint sweet vanilla scent to lure him to sleep. "Good night, my lady." He heard no answer from her since she had already fallen into a deep slumber. Harry lovingly pressed a kiss on her head before following suit.

Harry groggily cracked one of his eyes open and discovered that he had slept in - sunlight was streaming in bright and hot rays that heated the large room. He lifted his eyebrows in shock when he discovered that something was obscuring most of his vision. A loving smile spread across his lips when he discovered it was Hermione. It had been a long time since he'd awakened to the sight of his wife in his arms - she normally woke up before he did. His wonderful Hermione turned fourteen today, he thought as he gently stroked the long wavy brown hair that spilled all across his bare chest. Her slender arms were around his waist as she lay on his chest. He summoned his spectacles to him and put it on. He lay there quietly, enjoying the serenity of that rare moment.

The thought of the previous evening, when he met the rest of his family, made him smile. He was not as alone as he thought he was. Absorbed with his thoughts, he did not hear the approaching footsteps until...

“Hermione, you can’t be still sleeping. It’s already...” Neville trailed off when he entered the room with Daphne and Luna and saw Hermione sleeping on Harry. His eyes broadened in shock at the scene and he hurriedly muttered his apologies before dashing out of the room. The girls averted their eyes and followed suit.

Harry was befuddled by the flushed faces, hasty apologies until he peered down at Hermione and him. A thick comforter covered most of Hermione, exposing her alabaster arms and collarbone. Since Harry was only wearing his boxers, all they could see of him was his unclothed torso. Realisation finally dawned upon him. From their point of view, they must have only seen their skin. They must have thought that...

Harry’s face reddened at the thought. Hermione began to stir due to the disturbance. She opened one of her eye lazily to look at Harry.

“Good morning.” She murmured as she smiled warmly. Hermione sat up as she did a light stretch. “What time is it? I never feel as rested as I do now.” Hermione continued as she looked at him. Her sleepily eyes focused and she realised that his cheeks were flustered. “Something wrong?”

He nervously raked his hand through his hair and said, “Our friends wanted to give you a wake-up call...”

His words made her alert instantly.

“They saw us together!” She shouted as she jumped out of bed. However, something felt not right for her. She knitted her eyebrows in confusion as she glanced at herself. “I’m fully dressed. They didn’t see anything-”

“- I think they had the impression we were sleeping in our birthday suits. I don’t think we can keep the cat in the bag much longer.” Harry continued as he scratched the back of his neck tensely.

"I'm in a nightgown." She said as she glanced at herself. "Oh! The parts that were covered with the gown were hidden under the comforter..." trailed Hermione as she pinked.

"I think it is alright for them to think that you were in your birthday suit. It's your birthday, anyway." Harry said cheekily. He earned a swat on his chest immediately as his slightly peeved wife.

"It's probably best that we don't keep them waiting. They were here to wake me up, remember?" Hermione said as she glanced at him.

"Well, I must say they achieved their objective." Harry muttered as he climbed out of the bed to refresh himself.

The young couple hurriedly joined the others at a smaller dining room for breakfast. "So, Harry and Hermione, I'm sure that both of you had an enjoyable night," teased Daphne as she kept a straight face.

"Enjoyable might be the understatement of the century, Daphne." Neville added as he ate his toast.

"I can definitely understand why you two decided to sleep in today," continued Luna plainly as if she was talking about the weather.

"Oh hush," Hermione interrupted crossly as she spread her bread with butter and jam. Her cheeks were red with embarrassment.

"We didn't do anything last night." Harry clarified loudly, his cheeks tomato red from the teasing.

There was a pin-drop silence at the table.

"What do you mean you didn't do anything last night?" Neville asked incredulously.

"Now, that's even worse." Daphne commented as she stared at Harry. "Do you mean that Hermione's that unappealing to you? You didn't even feel the need while she was undressed?" Daphne demanded.

"No, what I meant was-"

“- Does this mean that you don’t know what to do with a girl? No wonder the older girls wanted to give you lessons on-“

“No, I do know -” Harry added defensively as his cheeks grew even redder. He remembered the incident all too well.

“Then - ”

“- Stop it, everyone.” Hermione interrupted with a firm voice as she set the butter knife on the table. “I knew all three of you were planning to tease us.” Hermione continued. “For your information, we were dressed, not naked as like you thought we were.”

“My Lord, you have guest. Miss Bones is here.” Charles announced, his voice cutting through the sniggers.

“Miss Bones?” Harry asked incredulously, “Please show her in.” He said excitedly, glad for a change of topic. Susan arrived, with a delighted smile fixed on her face. She was glad that she was seeing them all again so soon. They greeted her warmly as she joined them for breakfast.

“My Aunt said that she needed to go to the Ministry to settle certain issues about the Dementors. She wants to request for that they be removed from school.” Susan said.

“I’m sure the Minister will be very reluctant to do so,” Harry added solemnly.

“I agree – I doubt that he’ll do anything about them any time soon. Aunt Amelia explained the whole situation regarding your godfather. I think the fastest way to get rid of the Dementors is to clear Black’s name so that the Ministry has no reason to keep them there.” Susan answered with a smile. “My Aunt also mentioned something about catching Peter Pettigrew.”

“Yes, finding Pettigrew is critical evidence to appeal his case. At this point of time, he’s staying in Hogwarts as a pet rat,” Hermione explained as she ate.

"Let me guess, he's hiding in Gryffindor tower." Neville deduced.

"Right on the first guess."

"I think I can deduce which family he's been living with." Daphne said thoughtfully as she nibbled on her breakfast. "Pettigrew used to be part of some sort of secret order that resisted Voldemort. Dumbledore led that particular group. Pettigrew would've probably chosen to stay with a family that was in that order so that he could get information about his master. The only family that fits the bill would be the Weasleys." Daphne concluded.

"You don't mean Scabbers?" Neville asked in astonishment.

"Yes," Hermione answered.

"How long have you known it?" Neville questioned.

"Just for a few days - " Harry said indifferently.

"- Yes, all the evidence was there. We were just too busy to notice." Hermione continued. Then, she mentally berated herself for that slip of her tongue.

"I understand that Harry would be distracted because of his duties. Hermione, what have you been so busy with? You were most certainly not tutoring us all the time." Neville added in bafflement. "I've asked Luna and she's refused to tell us anything."

The couple exchanged glances. Hermione took the cue to explain the situation to them.

"She can't tell you anything because she did the craziest thing - she made an unbreakable vow not to reveal our secrets without our permission. She would've died if she did." Hermione replied she looked at her friend. Luna merely shrugged as if it were nothing. "What I'm about to tell you now can't be shared with others. Harry and I are married. We discovered we were soul mates when we

found ourselves mysteriously married after sharing a kiss during the summer holidays.”

“Wow, a soul-bonded couple.” Susan commented. “That’s really rare.”

“It explains everything.” Daphne added with a knowing smirk.

“So you have been living with each other?” Neville asked incredulously. He remembered that soul-bonded couples needed to maintain close physical contact with each other. “Luna was supposed to be staying with Hermione. If you and Hermione are living together, where does she stay?”

“We created a room for her in our tower.” Harry replied. “She’s known about our marriage from the moment she met us and immediately swore an unbreakable vow.”

“Sometimes I think that she is far more suited for Gryffindor than in Ravenclaw.” Hermione commented.

“Well, I just wanted to be in Ravenclaw so that I could see the Gremles. I heard that they live near the Ravenclaw Tower.” She added in her usual dreamy fashion.

Daphne astutely kept her questions to herself. She knew that she wouldn’t understand even if Luna explained.

Neville whipped out his wand and declared, “I, Neville Longbottom, swear upon my life and magic, that I will not disclose any of the secrets the Potters have entrusted to me, under any circumstances, so mote it will be.”

Harry and Hermione were gobsmacked.

There was an amused glint in Luna’s eyes when she commented, “He learns fast, don’t you think?”

“Honestly, I don’t want any of you guys to die if you accidentally reveal the secrets that you’re entrusted with. You don’t have to swear to it. We trust you.” Harry said as he raked his hand through his hair.

"I know you do. I just want to make sure your trust is not in vain." Neville answered plainly.

Hermione placed a comforting hand on his arm. "Thank you Nev. I know that you mean well. However, we feel that you shouldn't have to risk your life like that."

"If I'm not loyal to you, Hermione and Harry, then I'm nothing." He declared with a tone that concluded the whole subject.

"I guess we don't have to make a vow since our families already have the pact in place." Daphne added as she looked at Susan. Susan nodded her head vigorously.

"I think Neville was sorted to the wrong house." Susan commented. "I think Hufflepuff would've been a better fit for him than Gryffindor."

"I second that," Luna agreed. "However, you need courage to be loyal too."

"Good morning, Lord Greengrass. Care to have a spot of tea?" Dumbledore asked cordially as he motioned for the imposing Lord to take a seat.

"No, I'm fine, Headmaster Dumbledore." He answered gravely as he swept across the room and stood at the desk.

"Do you require the presence of Professor Snape?"

"No, I don't. This visit has nothing to do with my daughter's education. I've come to talk to you about other matters." Lord Greengrass replied impatiently. "I believe you remember our last conversation." He asked coolly.

"He's in excellent shape." Dumbledore answered simply. There was a split second of nervousness in his eyes. "I think your concerns back then were misplaced." He answered courteously as he looked at him undauntedly. Unlike the rest of his peers, Lord Greengrass had little admiration for the person. He saw him for who he really was but he

had little evidence to back up his claim. More than a decade ago, he had stormed into Dumbledore's office more and demanded the reason for Harry's disappearance. Lord Greengrass threatened the Headmaster since he felt that Dumbledore's actions were out of place.

"Once again, I must kindly warn you that we are not without teeth. You might be the one single man that Voldemort fears the most because of your sheer skill and magic. However, it is the level of influence you have in the society that matters." Lord Greengrass said coolly. "Do not attempt to manipulate Harry, his wife, or his friends or you'll have a lot to answer for."

"You don't understand anything. Harry is important. He needs the right influence and guidance..."

"Do you mean to suggest that Lady Bones and I are improper influences?" He interrupted ominously as he turned up his chilling glare. "If you can't see him as just plain Harry, then you'd better keep your distance from him, Headmaster. He is not a tool to be used." He warned. "Count this as a word of caution from Lady Bones and myself." He concluded. "The promise still stands, Headmaster. I haven't had the details from Harry. If I find out that he wasn't properly looked after when he was young despite your assurances and your reluctance for me to check up on him, there will be a price to pay. I wish you a good day, Headmaster." He concluded before apparating away.

After breakfast, the six teenagers slowly wandered around the large house. Harry and Hermione were shocked at the vastness of the place. His ancestors seemed to be fanatic about art and had decorated the entire place with variety of priceless sculptures and paintings of picturesque scenes.

The Potter Mansion had a library that was almost as impressive as the library Edmund had. The books were in mint condition despite their age. Harry was not surprised since the Potters were generally very fascinated with books.

The more they discovered about the house, the more Harry liked the house. He was told that the land surrounding the Potter Mansion was

equally expansive, despite the fact that some of the land was given to the House elves to establish a town. According to the Charles, after a school was built to provide education for the young house elves and self-improvement courses to the older elves, many elves had flocked to the place to learn. There was such a boom in the elf population near Potter Mansion that there became a need for security and laws. Free house elves made up the force that maintained the order in that area. A small group of house elves were also selected to govern the place. Charles and Gareth were part of the small ruling group. Shops set up by house elves soon sprouted up around the school, making it a small bustling town and it became a place where many house elves wanted to live.

As such, the house elves were exceptionally grateful to the Potters so they used their magic to strengthen the security of the Mansion, making it the safest place in the Magical World.

By the time they had completed exploring the house, it was already noon. Charles apparated over to inform Harry of the arrival of his important guests and led them out to the gardens for lunch.

A large skirted table covered with platters of food stood in the garden as they arrived. In large, bright gold letters, 'Happy Birthday, Hermione' blinked constantly across the table.

"Surprise!" The two adults shouted as Hermione came into view. Taking that as a cue, everyone whipped out their wand and showered her with colourful streamers as they shouted, "Happy Birthday" to her. Before she could say anything, tears began to well in her eyes as she took in the sight. It was at that moment that Charles brought the birthday cake in.

In cheerful voices, everyone burst into the birthday song, and loudly clapped along. Hermione was mildly embarrassed with all the attention. Hermione made a wish with her eyes closed after they finished singing the song. Dan had taken a picture with the camera he brought. She blew out the candles on the cake and everyone clapped jovially.

"Birthday kiss, birthday kiss!" They chanted repeatedly. Harry refused politely, seeing the look of embarrassment on Hermione's face. However, someone gave him a playful shove towards Hermione. His face cracked with a wide beam as he stared at his friends then at Hermione. He realised that Hermione had suddenly grown a fascination for her shoes and chuckled lightly. Harry took a deliberate step towards her and tipped her chin so that their gazes met. Harry swiftly bent down, their lips met in a sweet kiss. They broke apart after a few seconds, much to the disappointment of their friends.

Dan managed to capture the moment with his camera.

"Happy Birthday, sweetheart." Jean said affectionately as she embraced her daughter. Her father stood at the side, smiling at her. He hugged her when Jean released their daughter.

With a broad grin on his face, Harry embraced them too. Dan playfully tousled his hair as they watched Jean interrogate Hermione. "Daddy and Mummy, you must meet our new friends. I'm sure you've heard all about them from our letters." Hermione excitedly said as she began the round of introductions.

The teenagers had no trouble recognising them as Hermione's parents because she shared a likeness with them. Most notably, she inherited her father's warm brown eyes and unruly wavy brown hair, and her mother's smile.

Harry led all of the guests back to the table, where their lunch was left forgotten.

"It's time for presents!" Luna said brightly as she took a small present from the table and gave it to Hermione. She was surprised that they had brought presents for her.

"It's a good luck charm that I made. It also keeps the Piages away." Luna smiled affectionately.

"So that I won't forget anything, right?" Hermione smiled indulgently as she hugged Luna. "Thank you for the wonderful gift."

Neville took a wrapped present that looked suspiciously like a book and presented it to Hermione. "This is for you," Neville began. He caught the look on her face. "Yes, it's sort of a book. It's an organiser and a diary. I reckon that it would be something you would use since you have so many things to take note of." He explained sheepishly.

"Thank you." Hermione said as she gave him a grateful smile. "It's a very thoughtful gift." Neville gave her a one-armed hug. Daphne and Susan took the last gift on the table and gave it to Hermione.

"It was just a present from Daphne until last night. I decided to chip in." Susan smiled.

"You didn't have to. We've only known each other a short while." Hermione said in shock. Susan flashed her a warm smile, "Expect a present from me on Christmas though."

"So what is it?" Hermione asked as she looked at the large gift. She had no inkling what it could be. "It's a dragon hide bag. It is charmed to be indestructible, weightless, and bottomless. It's to defend you from spells thrown at your back by jealous fan girls." Daphne said with a straight face.

"I thought it was to hold all her books?" Susan questioned in disbelief.

"Do you mean to tell me that Hermione is usually hexed in the back?" Dan demanded as he stared at his son-in-law.

"No, Hermione has never been hexed by green-eyed fan girls." Harry corrected quickly as he protectively wrapped his arm around her waist. "Hermione can tell you that." He'd heard that fathers tended to be protective of their only daughter. He laughed when he saw the twinkle in his eyes. Dan was only pulling his leg! The sigh of relief that Harry had given before laughing amused Hermione greatly.

"Thank you for the wonderful gift, Daphne and Susan." Hermione said appreciatively as she hugged Daphne and Susan for the gift. Harry helped her to put her birthday gifts aside as everyone sat at the table.

“So were you surprised?” Luna asked as they began to tuck in. It was the first time the Grangers tasted the food prepared by the house elves and they liked it very much.

“Yes, you all surprised me! I didn’t think you all knew it was my birthday.” Hermione said as she smiled at Harry gratefully. Harry, as usual, was serving her some food.

“You have your husband to blame. He wanted your friends and your family to celebrate your birthday with you.” Daphne said.

“He kept reminding us about your birthday,” added Neville.

“Yes, he didn’t even spare me. “ Susan teased.

Harry merely held up his hands in surrender. “I am guilty of all charges. However, I think all of you exaggerate far too much.” Harry grinned.

“It’s not that far off from the truth, Harry, “Luna answered. “You did remind us whenever Hermione wasn’t around.”

Blood rushed up to his cheeks, tinting them red. “I’m sure it wasn’t that often.” He muttered to himself as he lowered his gaze and tried to recollect. The comment was meant for him only but everyone at the table heard it and it incited everyone to burst out laughing.

After their lunch, the Grangers decided to take the entire group out to celebrate Hermione’s birthday.

“Are you sure you don’t need to raise a wand to get a bus? We just wait here for the bus?” Daphne asked in confusion as she looked at the Grangers. Everyone was dressed in normal Muggle clothing. It wasn’t anything new to most of them since they had all worn Muggle clothing before. Hermione wanted to celebrate her birthday by going into the Muggle World so that their friends could have a taste of what it is like being a Muggle.

“Yes, I’m sure that we don’t. We wait until we see the bus then we flag it with our hand. Look out for this number, because buses with

other numbers service a different area.” Dan explained to the young witch.

Harry chortled as he looked at his friends. “Well, you can’t really say that you’ve been to the Muggle world if you’ve never used public transport. So, that’s why Mum and Dad decided to travel by public bus.”

Dan and Jean soon discovered the differences of the two worlds.

“That’s weird. You have buses to different areas. We only have one bus and it goes everywhere.” Luna said.

Dan looked at Harry and Hermione for some explanation, but they just shrugged in response, since neither of them had ever tried the Knight Bus.

“We usually travel by other methods like the Floo, portkeys, and by apparation.” Neville explained. “Sometimes, we also use House elves. It is far more convenient than buses.”

The bus soon came and they had no problem boarding the bus since the Grangers paid all their fares.

“They know that we’re not supposed to do magic at all, right?” Hermione asked Harry worriedly as she glanced at her friends. Luna, Daphne, Neville, and Susan had their faces plastered on the windows of the bus as they watched the scenery outside. Frequently, they would point to certain things, like the telephone booths and other vehicles, and asked the Grangers about them.

“I think they all know that we’re only allowed to do magic with the supervision of parents. You don’t have to worry about getting in trouble with the Ministry. Susan must be really familiar with the rules since her Aunt is the Head of the Law Enforcement.” Harry assured as he held her closer to him. Hermione placed her head in that familiar crook of his neck as she wrapped her arms around his waist for support.

"Let me get this straight. We're heading to a cinema to catch movie, then we'll have a meal, and break up for shopping?" Harry asked as he looked at his wife.

"Yes, I really can't think of anything else, unless you want to go to the amusement park again." She answered. "However, you've just been there recently." She pointed out.

"Very well, movie and shopping it will be." He stated with a wide smile. "I think it'll be an interesting experience for them." Harry predicted.

Their friends, used to shopping in the small shops in Diagon Alley, were pleasantly surprised when they first entered the shopping mall. It was like being in heaven for Daphne and Susan - they loved to shop. The stores' window displays fascinated them and their teenage heads were spinning from trying to take it all in. The variety of clothing and the bold colours were amazing to them – there were a few displays that dazzled them so much that they stood outside the stores staring. Harry and Hermione had to stop to check on them every so often to make sure that they didn't lose any of their friends.

In the end, Hermione decided to change her plans. They ended up shopping first. Daphne and Susan tucked Hermione and Luna's arms with theirs and led them to explore the shops. Hermione had never shown any real enthusiasm for shopping unless she needed to buy something. This was the first time she seemed interested in browsing under the Daphne and Susan's guidance. They encouraged Hermione and Luna to touch the material of the clothes and to try them on whenever Susan and Daphne spotted them take a second glance at certain outfits. The boys were not spared. They too had a wonderful time wearing different outfits and doing imitations of a model on a runway as the others gave their honest opinions.

"Harry, do you think they have the money to pay for all their things?" Dan asked, as his eyes grew large at the growing pile of clothes they were buying. Harry had selected several outfits for himself.

"Don't worry, I'm picking up the bill." Harry grinned as he watched them having a lot of fun trying the different outfits and accessories. "I don't think they'll spend my entire fortune with just one shopping trip."

Apparently, one of them heard that. "Really, Harry? We could always make the jewellery shop our next stop." Daphne joked.

"In that case, I'll make sure your father gets the tab." Harry laughed brightly.

"Dad and Mum, since you're here, why don't you get something for yourselves?" He asked. "I'm sure it's not fun standing here and watching us." Harry smiled.

"Your treat?" Dan asked with a playful smile.

"Naturally." Harry answered. "It'll be my pleasure."

"Very well then." Dan led Jean away to try some clothes.

"Harry, I think this would look great on you." Hermione called when she spotted a nice shirt. Harry joined his wife to look at the shirt that she had picked out for him. The sale assistants warmly helped them when they realised that they were going to be spending a lot in the shop. And spend they did - Dan had frowned when he saw the bill but Harry nonchalantly gave the cashier his credit card.

Harry had to find a spot to enlarge the matchstick box he had kept in his pocket to its normal size. He stored all their things in the trunk then reduced the size again. "How I love magic," Harry grinned rakishly. It gave them even more motivation to shop, seeing that they didn't have to carry all their purchases around. Harry didn't think shopping could be that fun. Neville, Luna, and Hermione had gotten into the spirit of shopping and began to purchase many outfits and accessories. Luna was more interested in accessories like earrings and necklaces and she spent a lot of time looking through the jewellery towers. She was the only one who bought weird assortment of things like Dream-catchers and small key chains.

Hermione went on another shopping spree at the bookstore, grabbing the novels on the shelves that interested her, and piling them up. The other teenagers were interested in the stationary the Muggles used. They were shocked when they realised that Muggles didn't use quills

or parchment. They decided to buy some ballpoint pens, paper, and folders when Hermione had explained their uses.

"I can't believe how convenient writing could be. No spills." Neville said.

"That was the reason why I had difficulty writing during our first year - we had to use quills. I was using pens and pencils in school before I went to Hogwarts." Harry explained.

"You mean you'd already attended school before you started Hogwarts?" Daphne asked in surprise.

"Yes, we did. Non-magical children usually begin their school by the age of six or seven." Hermione explained. Seeing that she had difficulty carrying the books, Harry immediately took the stack from her.

"Hermione, it looks as if you are trying to bring the entire bookstore home," Neville commented as he gaped at the amount of books Harry was carrying.

Her cheeks turned pink at the comment. "We don't usually get a chance to go to a Muggle bookstore to buy books."

"Novels?" Daphne commented as she briefly looked through her selection. "I thought you were better than this," she teased.

Her cheeks reddened even more. "I can't be reading about magic all the time. I need something for leisure." She defended.

"I thought reading thick volumes on Charms or Ancient Runes was your idea of relaxation." Harry joked as he raised his eyebrows in mock surprise. He knew she would have hit him for that remark if he hadn't been carrying the stack of books.

All of those books went into his trunk too.

The teenagers expressed an interest in watching a movie so they purchased tickets to a comedy, *17 Again*. Harry, Hermione, and her

parents were bombarded with questions about the snack they bought - popcorn. The Grangers left the teenagers to have their own entertainment.

When they entered the theatre, there were even more questions since it was the first time the magical teens had been in a theatre. Hermione calmly explained to them the workings. When the lights went off and the show began, everyone was so engrossed with the large animated, talking people on the screen that they stopped asking questions and watched as they popped kernels of popcorn into their mouths periodically. Harry smiled as he leaned as close to Hermione as their seats would allow. He lovingly pressed a kiss on her knuckles as he observed his wife. He was delighted that Hermione was enjoying the outing so much.

They had all loved the light-hearted movie and it had made them interested in other movies like Star Wars. Neville and Harry thought that the light sabres were cool. The protagonist and his friend were using replicas as they fought. Hermione told them she could rent the movie for them to watch if they ever went to her place. Harry decided that if it was possible, he was going to install a miniature movie theatre at the Potter Mansion. The girls, including Hermione, swooned over the young good-looking actor in the film. Harry realised that they weren't the only girls doing that. The boys just didn't understand why girls had found him attractive. Harry, with his hands tucked firmly in his pocket, commented sullenly to Neville that he didn't find the actor dashing at all. Neville had agreed heartily to his comment. Their exchange of words did not go unnoticed and it incited cool glares from the girls.

The Grangers found them standing the same way when they met up with the group a few moments later. The girls were still in an active discussion about the handsome young actor, ignoring the two boys who were standing a short distance away from them. Jean smiled at the sight of her daughter mixing with her female friends. She had never seen her daughter getting along well with other girls.

Dobby and Charles took the teenagers back to Hogwarts from the Granger's residence. They were required to be back at school by dinnertime. Susan joined them at the Gryffindor table for the meal,

and by then, everyone was used to the idea of having special guests at their table.

Harry noted the strange look Dumbledore had shot in his direction and suspected that something had happened while he was away. He saw the familiar ginger-coloured cat approaching him from the side and Harry immediately picked Crookshanks up and into his arms.

There is another two-legged pretending to be an animal on the grounds. This time it's a black dog. I think he wants the other two-legged. Crookshanks thought as he looked at him. You were waiting for him, weren't you?

Harry's heart soared at the news. He was certain that Crookshanks might have overheard their conversation and knew what he had to look out for. "Where is he? Is he alright?" He said in an excited whisper as he scratched the cat. He purred in contentment.

He's a bit thin. You might consider bringing food and clothes for him. I can bring you to him. He answered simply.

"Alright." Harry smiled. "You bring me to meet him later. Good job, Crookshanks." He answered as he let the cat down. He rewarded him with a juicy chicken leg, which Crookshanks attacked immediately.

I'm still mildly angry with you for that bath, Crookshanks added as he ate the chicken leg. Harry chuckled lightly at his comment.

Would apologising help? He asked affectionately.

How about another chicken leg and we'll call it quits? Crookshanks answered as he eyed at the chicken leg on Harry's plate meaningfully. Harry casually glanced at his wife and realised that she had not noticed their interaction.

He took the chicken leg and slipped it to Crookshanks. Go hide somewhere to eat it. Hermione isn't going to be too pleased if she finds out I'm feeding you fried food.

I know she can't stay angry with you for long. So don't act as if you're doing me a big favour. Crookshanks answered cheekily as he took the leg and hid under the table to eat it.

A/N: Thank you for the reviews for the last chapter. It was a hectic week for me. Anyway, 17 again is anachronistic but I can't think of any comedies that fit that timeline at the moment. Well, I hope you'll have a nice week. Please comment and review.

Chapter 14

Beta-read by frustr8dwriter

Of all times, I can't believe that you'd arrive today. Harry growled inwardly. He'd wanted to spend the rest of the day with his wife. He squinted his eyes in a desperate attempt to find his way around in the dark without casting a spell. Not that the Dementors would notice if he cast the 'lumos' spell of course, but Harry had a feeling that they wouldn't be the only ones out on the grounds on this particular night. The invisibility cloak over his head did not make things easier for him. Harry knew he could use a simple disillusionment spell, but for this particular task, he felt that he needed to do it the Marauders' way - sneaking around under his father's infamous invisibility cloak. He had to tread carefully around the outskirts of the forest. The bushy ginger tail of Crookshanks, which could be seen swishing side to side if he looked hard enough, was his only guide for this expedition.

Harry heedlessly set out to meet Sirius alone, with only Crookshanks as a guide and without a backup plan in case something went wrong. It wasn't as if it were safe to venture outside the school: there were Dementors patrolling the grounds and Harry had no idea where this meeting place was. Assuming that there were people with brains within the Ministry, there was probably an increased number of Dementors on patrol.

He considered himself lucky since he hadn't run into any. He could deal with them but it took a lot of magic to do so.

From afar, he noticed the familiar lone tree planted in the middle of the grounds. It was the Whomping Willow. Harry shuddered slightly as he recalled how violent the tree was. The car that Harry and Ron drove at the beginning of their second year had crashed straight into the tree. He had to thank the lucky stars that he and Ron had managed to escape from the tree without any lasting injuries. Crookshanks halted, turned around, and stared at him. Since Harry was invisible, he wasn't sure if Crookshanks knew that he was looking straight at him, but he heard his thoughts.

Wait here. Crookshanks commanded firmly. Turning around, he trotted towards the tree. The branches of the tree began to lash aggressively, trying to hit the cat. Harry held his breath as he watched Crookshanks deftly avoid the swishing branches and disappear under the roots. Harry dashed forward; terrified that something might've happened to the pet. Abruptly, the tree became lifeless. Not a leaf twitched or shook. Crookshanks came back into sight, unharmed, waiting patiently for him to join him. Harry expelled the breath that he was holding for so long and joined the cat.

"What did you do?" Harry asked curiously

There is a knot near the trunk. If you can squeeze in to touch it, the tree becomes motionless. Crookshanks explained carefully. Follow me, it's going to be a little dark, so use your wand. Harry drew his wand from the holster and silently cast a 'lumos' spell as he followed Crookshanks into the hole in the roots. Harry had to crawl on all fours to get in and he slid down an earthy slope to the bottom of a very low tunnel. The tunnel was so small and Harry had to walk with his back hunched over. He removed the invisibility cloak and kept it in his pocket since he no longer needed it. The tunnel was quite long and after walking for a while, he had a feeling that he was not longer on the grounds of Hogwarts.

His assumption was confirmed when he heard Hermione's frantic thoughts.

Harry, I don't see you on the map anymore. Is everything alright?

I'm fine, sweetheart. You were checking the map?

Naturally, I had to make sure that you were alright. Anyway, I also needed the map to check if the coast is clear. It wouldn't be nice if Ron actually caught us kidnapping his pet.

You're catching the rat tonight?

All the better to clear his case by tomorrow, don't you think? You can't expect us to stay here in Gryffindor tower doing nothing while you sneak out. It is danger-free compared to what you're doing now.

I'm just going to meet Sirius. I don't think he's going to hurt me. Besides, I have my invisibility cloak.

Dementors can 'see' through disguises and invisibility cloaks, Harry. You're not particularly good at dealing them when they are close to you.

I'll shift to you if any situation arises.

Please don't do anything reckless.

I won't. Harry assured. I was planning to ask Dobby to take Sirius to our place after I've spoke to him. It's nothing risky, Hermione.

Alright, I'll ask Susan and Daphne to tell Aunt Am and Uncle Os about your plan so that they can welcome him at Potter Mansion after we've caught the rat. To play it safe, we're going to put Pettigrew in a deep sleep.

Good luck, Mione. Be careful.

You too, Harry.

"How do you even know of this place?" Harry asked as he followed tiredly. Running in a crouched position was no easy feat at all.

The two-legged showed me, Crookshanks answered as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. You really need to exercise, Harry.

"That's really low." Harry answered. "The bathing incident was more than a week ago."

Crookshanks merely laughed. Harry was glad when the tunnel began to widen. He was finally getting out. Moments later, the path twisted and Harry had never felt more relieved than when he saw a patch of dim light through a small opening. Harry eagerly edged forward to see what lay beyond.

It was a room, a very disorderly and dusty room. Paper was peeling from the walls and there were stains all over the floor. Every piece of the furniture was broken as though someone had ripped it apart. The windows were all boarded up. Harry examined the scratch marks on the one of the pieces of furniture carefully and realised it belonged to a werewolf. This was the room that Harry had read about in his father's diary - where Uncle Moony, while he was still a student at Hogwarts, was brought to every month to transform. There was no Wolfsbane potion available back then, so he had to be distanced from the rest of the school lest he bit them accidentally. He pulled himself out of the hole and spotted a shadowy hallway to the right of him. He crept into the hall and up the crumbling stairs to the second level. When he reached the dark landing, only a door was opened. So Harry walked in.

Sitting on the bed, scratching the purring Crookshanks with his bony hand was a skinny man with a mass of filthy matted hair that hung to his elbows. The light shining from his wand caught his attention and he whipped his head up to look at him.

Harry's face reflected the same disbelief that was on his godfather's face when Harry looked at Sirius for the first time. If his eyes weren't shining out of the deep, dark sockets, he might have passed off as a corpse. The waxy white skin was stretched so tightly over the bones of his face; it almost looked like a skull.

Azkaban has taken a toll on him, Harry thought as pity made his tongue grow thick. Sympathy was soon replaced by rage and that emotion began to heat his blood when he discovered the extent his godfather had suffered in vain. They will pay for this, he thought, making a silent promise to himself. Harry ended the spell and lowered his wand. His eyes were fixed on the ashen white man in front of him. A look of surprise crossed the man's face as his eyes followed the movement of his wand. A glimmer of recognition appeared in his unusually dark eyes.

"Harry?" He asked hoarsely as the man stood up shakily. It sounded as if he hadn't used the voice for a long time. The huge contrast between the man he saw, smiling happily, next to his father in his parent's wedding photograph and the person who stood in front of

him gauging his response, rendered him speechless. Harry swallowed visibly before giving a nod.

An affectionate beam stretched across his godfather's face. The happiness emanating from him was infectious and Harry felt a smile tugging his lips.

"Hi, Sirius." He greeted in an uneven voice when he finally found his tongue.

"I must say you're the least person I expected to see tonight." He said in a throaty voice. The smile on Harry's face widened.

"We need to talk." Harry said cordially as he gestured him to take a seat on the bed. "Before we do, I need to ask someone to join us." A look of confusion and fear crossed Sirius' thin face briefly. "He won't betray your whereabouts. We know that you're innocent." Harry assured calmly. Sirius nodded uncertainly. Harry then called for Dobby.

A 'crack' was heard instantly and the faithful house elf immediately appeared with a huge basket of food and drinks. He was thoughtful enough to bring a clean set of clothes. Sirius's eyes had widened in shock at the sight of the food and clothing.

"Can you please bring Professor Lupin to me?" asked Harry as he looked at his faithful friend. "But don't let anyone know that you're bringing him to meet me." Harry cautioned. Dobby nodded excitedly before disappearing to fetch Professor Lupin. Harry grinned when he saw a bewildered expression on Sirius' face.

"All in good time. Sit down and tuck in. I'll fill you in as you eat." Harry answered. At that invitation, Sirius immediately helped himself to the food ravenously. Harry helped him to pour a goblet of pumpkin juice as he began his lengthy explanation.

"I inherited my parents' diaries a few months ago and realised that you did not betray them. In the last entry that my Dad had made, he wrote about switching secret keepers. We did some investigation and know that you are not guilty of murder." He said as he watched him

wolfed down his food. "Uncle Os - Lord Greengrass and Aunt Am - Lady Bones are going to do their best to clear your name so that you can be free again."

Sirius' eyes grew large at Harry's statement. He had stuffed too much food in his mouth for him to respond coherently. Sirius hurriedly swallowed the food and took a gulp of pumpkin juice before speaking.

"They're working together to clear my name? I thought they were still at loggerheads," asked Sirius incredulously. "How did you know them? I thought you had to live with your Aunt and Uncle because I was in Azkaban?"

"I just met them recently. What do you mean that I had to live with my mother's relatives?"

"I'm your godfather. Your father and mother appointed me as your guardian if anything happened to them. I thought that since I was in Azkaban, they had to put you in the care of your blood relatives. Well, the Greengrasses and the Bones were technically not related to you." He answered croakily as he hurriedly wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"We were told by Dumbledore that my mother wanted me to live with-

"- Ha! Your mother would never willingly put you with her family. She knew that they hated anything related to magic." Sirius interrupted before a frown creased his face.

It set the wheels in his head turning.

Before Harry could speak up, there was a 'crack' and Dobby appeared with Professor Lupin. He looked very pale, no doubt still recovering from his recent transformation.

"Padfoot," Lupin said emotionally as he walked across the room and embraced Sirius like a brother. "I'm sorry that I believed that you were capable of betraying James before Harry found the truth." Lupin replied.

"It's alright, Moony. It was my fault that James and Lily died." Sirius answered in an emotion-stricken voice. "I'm not going to rest until the double-crosser is dead." He growled chillingly.

"Why did you switch without telling anyone?" Lupin asked.

"Dumbledore pointed out that everyone knew that I was James' best friend. It was a common knowledge that Voldemort was coming after the Potters for spoiling his plans far too many times. At the time we didn't know who was passing the information to the other side, so I decided to act upon his word and change the secret keeper to Pettigrew without telling anyone. It was the worst mistake I've ever made."

Harry didn't have the heart to tell Sirius that Tom was actually after him, and not his parents. After relieving the dreadful experience about the night that his parents died to protect him, he knew that Tom wasn't targeting them. Tom's purpose in visiting the Godric's Hollow was to kill him.

Lupin became very still. "What happened to all those people that day?"

"He blasted them into pieces. After cutting off one of his fingers, he transformed and scurried away like the rat that he is." Sirius spat. His eyes grew murderous. "But he's alive. Pettigrew's at Hogwarts."

"We know exactly where he is." At Harry's statement, Sirius snapped his head to look at him.

"Hermione and Neville are catching him right now." Harry said.

Sirius and Lupin exchanged looks upon hearing that.

"You're going to be a free man soon," continued Harry excitedly. His smile immediately faded away and was replaced by a frown as he said in a frantic tone, "I-I need to head back to Hogwarts right now!"

Hermione used the map to track down Pettigrew. Unlike Harry, she managed to come up with a plan despite the late notice. Fred and George were going to be distracting the Gryffindors for the night. She needed the Boy's Dorm to be empty so that she could carry out the mission with greater chances of success.

She was sitting at her favourite armchair near the fire at the common room when she was having a mental conversation with Harry. The map was spread across her lap as she monitored Harry's movements and the Boy's Dorm. Neville was sitting next to her, waiting for her to give the nod so that they could execute their plan. Luna was absent from this mission since she had an exam the next morning and had to get to bed early. Hermione was convinced they didn't need so many people. As for Daphne and Susan, they were acting as messengers between Lord Greengrass and Lady Bones and the Hogwarts crew. Hermione had conveyed Harry's message to them and they had gone to send a note to Daphne's father and Susan's aunt.

Not a single Gryffindor was paying attention to Hermione and Neville. The Weasley twins managed to get the attention of the common room with some of their pranks. Hermione and Neville patiently waited till the coast was clear before slipping upstairs.

They located the Ron's bed easily with Neville's help. Sleeping blissfully on the bed was the worn out looking rat, Scabbers, or Peter Pettigrew. Hermione had no idea why they'd decided to leave him alone after learning that he was an animagus. He might bring valuable information to the Dark Lord. Without a second thought, Hermione whipped out her wand and cast a spell to make him sleep indefinitely. Neville scooped him up gently and placed him into the cage that Hermione had brought. The cage had been fortified by spells and it would be impossible for Pettigrew to escape after he was placed in it.

Neville gave her the thumbs up for the good work done after folding up the Marauders' map.

Now, all they needed to do is to get out of the dorm without being seen with the rat.

“Expelliarmus,” A feminine voice called out suddenly. The wand flew out of Hermione’s hand into a far corner of the room before she could grab it. Hermione and Neville whipped their heads around and came face-to-face with Ginny. She was glaring at them, with her arms crossed in front of her chest as she stood at the entrance.

Her eyes shifted down and focus on the cage in Hermione’s hand before they shifted up to stare at them.

“What are you doing with Ron’s rat?” She questioned quietly as she uncrossed her arms and took a step towards them. Ginny had never looked so terrifying before, with her eyes narrowed into slits, and a menacing smile on her face. Hermione and Neville instinctively took a step backwards.

The image Hermione always had of the red-haired second year was of a young, sweet, and bubbly girl. That picture of her shattered at this point as Hermione looked into her eyes. There was no warmth or innocence in her disturbing midnight black eyes. Hermione never had the chance to speak to her after her experience with Tom Riddle but she was sure that when the Dark Lord possessed her last year, it had altered her.

Neville shifted slightly.

“Stupefy!” The girlish voice rang unemotionally.

Hermione could only stare in shock when Ginny whipped her wand out in an inhumane speed and cast a stunning spell at Neville.

The spell hit him squarely on his chest and he collapsed.

“Neville!” Hermione shouted as she tried to move forward to catch him as she watch him fall onto the ground.

“Don’t move.” Ginny threatened with a bone-chilling voice.

Hermione, distracted by the sight of Neville, didn’t realise that Ginny had crossed the room and pointed the wand at her throat until she felt something poking her.

Ginny had pressed the wand firmly on her neck. Her eyes were disturbingly cold as she stared at Hermione. Hermione felt chills run down her spine at the alarming realisation that Ginny had stunned Neville without a moment of hesitation.

Hermione knew that she would have no qualms in using it on her. She could have disarmed her in an instant but this was Ginny, a girl she had always seen as a younger sister. The sight of her being so malicious sent her heart racing in fear.

"That's your friend, Neville whom you've just stunned in a heartbeat." Hermione pointed out emotionally as she pointed to Neville with her free hand. "Who are you? The Ginny I know wouldn't have done this!"

There was a cruel sardonic laugh. "Yes," she hissed maliciously. "I wouldn't have had to, if he wasn't here with you. It's your fault, Granger." She spat as her eyes narrowed. "I've been watching you. Do you know how long I've waited to find you alone since Harry told us that you were dating?"

The smile on Harry's face faded immediately when he felt Hermione's abrupt change of emotions. "I-I need to head back to Hogwarts right now!" Harry growled as he stood up suddenly and drew out his wand. Out of the blue, all connections he had with her were severed, leaving him with a void.

Hermione, he thought anxiously.

There was no response.

Hedwig, find Hermione now! He commanded urgently.

I felt that – don't worry, I'm on my way. Hedwig promptly answered.

Sirius and Lupin's eyebrows shot up when they saw the worried expression on his face but before they could respond, "Accio wands!" A cold voice spoke.

Lupin's wand and Harry's wand flew out of their hand into an outstretched hand of Severus Snape. The Potions master was staring at them with an insane expression on his face.

Bollocks!

He couldn't ditch them and shift to Hermione's side. He knew about the feud between Sirius and Snape from his parents' diary. He couldn't leave them alone. Snape would no doubt hand his innocent godfather to the Dementors.

Hermione was at Hogwarts. He reasoned that she had the ability to defend herself against anything that might threaten her while she's still in the building.

Harry quickly came into a decision. He would help Sirius out of this situation first. His eyebrows knitted into a frown as he glared at the intruder.

"Potter, out of your dormitory at this time? Dumbledore asked me to expect you, said you would want to hunt down Sirius Black for revenge. Now what do we have here? Why it's Sirius Black." He mocked as he stared at Sirius at the eye as he pocketed both wands.

"How did you get here?"

"I apparated here." He added impassively as his eyes grew alarmingly solid. "Someone had directed me to this place in the past." He fixed his eyes on Sirius.

Lupin walked towards Snape, coming between Sirius and him. "Severus, you know -"

Bang! Thin cords of ropes shot out of Snape's wand and twisted themselves around Lupin, who overbalanced and fell onto the floor, unable to move.

"I don't want to waste my time on a werewolf. That's one more for Azkaban."

Sirius growled in rage as he tried to pounce on Snape. However, Snape pointed the wand at the space between his eyes.

"Give me a reason," He whispered as he glared at Sirius menacingly. "Give me a reason to and I swear I will." Sirius stopped dead and glared at him with equal loathing.

Harry tried to intervene.

"You've got the wrong guy, Professor. Please lower your wand." Harry said calmly, seeing no response from Snape, he continued. "If Sirius Black wanted to hurt anyone, he would've already done so before you arrived. I'm not here to take my revenge. I'm here to free him." Harry said evenly despite the growing uneasiness as he approached the two adults. Time was ticking away, Hermione was still in danger.

His statement made Snape whipped his head to the side to look at him. The grip on his wand loosened slightly with the shock he was feeling. Crookshanks, at this decisive moment, leapt and knocked Snape's wand out of his hand.

Harry caught his wand nimbly by leaning slightly to the side. Without further ado, he freed Lupin with a spell and summoned the wands from his pocket.

"Sirius is innocent." Harry continued calmly even though he was feeling very anxious with each passing second as he faced the disarmed Snape. Harry lowered his wand in a gesture to prove that he was not hostile. The Potions master glared at him with so much contempt that it made him shudder slightly.

Something wasn't right, he thought suddenly. The room was growing colder. His stomach sank when he realised the cause of that unnatural chillness. He glanced at Sirius, hoping to get a confirmation from him and he had it.

All the colour from Sirius' face had disappeared.

They were here.

There was nowhere to run. Snape burst into raucous pearl of laughter. "I didn't think they'd arrive so soon. I've told them that you will appear at the Shrieking Shack tonight. I don't think it's up to you to decide anymore, Potter. The Dementors will kiss him upon sight."

His guts twisted at the thought of the nasty consequences. All of the Dementors patrolling around the school would be flocking to the house. They had to leave.

"Harry?" Hermione echoed in confusion. The subject of her husband made her momentarily overlook the situation she was currently in.

"My mother was in such a rage. She sent me a howler reprimanding me about his choice of partners. Harry brought you to the ball instead of me! I should've been the one beside him when he made his debut as a Lord – not you!" She spat as her glare became more intense.

Waves of pity wash over her as she looked at the slightly deranged girl. Hermione had known of her obsession of him since her second year but she had no idea it was the product of Molly Weasley's teachings. Hermione had to think of an alternative to get out of there without hurting Ginny.

"Who do you think you are anyway? You have no status. You're not even drop-dead gorgeous. Sure, you have the brains but what more can you give him? He should be mine!" Ginny shrieked in a high pitch voice as the wand began to tremble with her outburst of emotions.

Hermione remained silent. For once, she did not have an answer. These were the questions she habitually asked herself when she saw the other girls in the school longing for Harry. Never once did she manage to come up with a satisfying one.

"With each day, I find you even more desirable."

"You're smart, loyal, fun to be with, and a whole lot more. The list is unending. They may be pretty but you have both inner and outer beauty."

Harry's loving words along with the endearing words that her parents always use flooded her mind as she pondered for an answer. She finally understood. She would only know the answer when she looked at herself through the eyes of those who cared for her. Hermione was forced back into reality when she heard the next statement.

"Maybe with you out of the picture, he'll finally notice me." The red head whispered softly. There was an insane look on her face that made Hermione unable to hold back her outbursts.

"Are you mad?" Hermione squealed loudly. "It's silly to commit murder so that someone you have a crush on will notice you. You're throwing away your future- "

"- It's easy for you to say that when the person you love, loves you!" The red head growled agitatedly as she punctuated each word with a hard jab of her wand.

She blinked at the pain and her gaze grew soft immediately when she looked at Ginny.

"Harry loves you," Hermione interjected lovingly, like an elder sister, "Not in the way that you want him to, but he does. He loves you like a sister. What would he think if he saw you like this?"

The change of tone had no affect on Ginny. "Don't try to use that trick on me, Granger. It won't work." She added threateningly. "He sees me as a sister because of you! I was supposed to be his girlfriend."

Hermione would have shaken her head in despair for her single-mindedness but she couldn't since the wand was still on her throat. "He might've seen you as more than a sister if you had seen him more than just the Boy-who-Lived or your Saviour."

"What makes you think that you're any different, Granger? You're only with him because he can give you, a mudblood, status in the Magical World." She spat.

Hermione's eyes narrowed slightly.

"I'd be happy if he didn't have the scar that made him famous because it would mean that he still had his parents and a normal life out of the spotlight. I'd still want to be with him even if he wasn't a Potter – I'd want him just because he's Harry." Hermione added in a defiant voice, showing no fear as she stared straight into her eyes.

"Charles! Take Sirius!" He ordered as he threw Lupin's wand back to him. Lupin caught it swiftly but he was still a bit disorientated. Harry didn't care what his godfather would think. It would be more dangerous if the Dementors found him. The elderly house elf that appeared upon command, took Sirius by the arm, and disappeared with a crack.

Snape went wild with rage.

He flailed his arms madly in his attempt to catch Sirius before he was whisked off by Charles but he had disappeared before he could grab him.

His glorious plan of capturing his nemesis dashed at that moment. It was too much for Snape to handle. He spun around and grabbed Harry by his collar.

"Where have you taken him, Potter?" He spat in a deranged manner. The room was getting colder by the second. They didn't have time to lose.

"THIS ISN'T THE TIME, PROFESSOR!" Harry spewed as he tore the pale hands from his collar. "WE NEED TO LEAVE!"

The room grew strangely frosty.

They had no time to lose.

"Expecto Patronum!" Harry shouted. He needed to stall the Dementors so that they could make their getaway. The corporeal Stag dashed out of his wand and charged towards the hooded figures appearing in the landing. His Patronus was joined by one more. Lupin

felt well enough to conjure one. "Professor Snape, take Professor Lupin and go now! Dobby! "

Crookshanks leapt into his arms as Dobby appeared beside him. Harry saw that Snape was too caught up in his rage to do anything. Harry knew that he might splinch Uncle Moony and himself if he tried to apparate with such unsound mind.

It wouldn't do.

"Dobby, take them back to Hogwarts." Harry ordered worriedly. Dobby faithfully followed his orders. He grabbed the two Professors by their arms, despite their protests and disappeared with a 'crack'.

"Stay still and hold on tight." Harry told Crookshanks. The ginger-coloured cat nodded and he shifted.

Harry and Crookshanks found themselves in the Boy's Dorm.

The sight of his lover in danger evoked the protective nature of him, without a second thought, he pointed the wand at the offender and shouted. "Expelliarmus! Stupefy!"

The wand that Ginny held to Hermione's throat shot sharply out of the way as she was stunned. She collapsed on the ground when the spell hit her straight in back.

Hermione watched in surprise as Ginny paled suddenly, closed her eyes, and slumped forward. She caught the small red headed girl in time as her body fell. Hermione raised her head sharply and saw Harry standing near the entrance, with his wand out.

Their eyes met.

She saw relief in his eyes after surveying her. Hermione gently placed Ginny on the floor as Harry ran across the room to her.

His arms went around her in a bone crushing embrace as he hugged her forcefully.

"Never do that to me again. I didn't know what was happening with you. I was so frightened!" Harry growled worriedly into her hair as he held her close. Hermione hurriedly removed the mental barriers. His relief flooded through her system. "I was afraid I was too late. Snape was -"

The feeling of Harry next to her brought a sense of serenity to her. Her mind couldn't discern the muffled words that Harry was saying but she could feel the immediate lifting his spirits when he found her unharmed. She savoured the warmth of his body until the name of their potion master registered in her head.

"- Snape?" She questioned as she peeled herself away from him and stared at Harry. "How did he know you'd be there? Did you fight with..."

His lips descended upon hers and captured them in desperate, searing kiss. Her mind went blank as desire sent heat coursing through her body. She responded with equal zeal - burrowing her long slim fingers into his dark messy hair as their lips remained fused in a frantic kiss. His arms tightened around her ardently, pressing her petite frame to him as his tongue slid ardently back and forth across her lips, sending waves rolling waves of lust through her system.

"Hermione," he murmured in a ragged whisper as his lips slide down her neck. He peppered insistent and possessive kisses down her neck.

"Harry." She moaned when he fervently nipped the sensitive spot at the crook of her neck.

The sound of his name on her lips drove him wild with longing. He expressed all his anxieties for her in an earth-shattering kiss when their mouths melded again. Hermione parted her lips slightly and his tongue slipped between them, plunging into the soft recesses of her mouth. When their tongues met, Hermione felt herself grow weak as jolt after jolts of passion rocked her body at the contact.

Harry shuddered as their tongues touched and caressed. It drove them over the edge with the overload of arousal in their blood. She

felt his hands caressing her body boldly, causing her to shiver delightfully from the sensations he was evoking with his roaming hands.

The sudden realisation that they were still in the Boy's Dorm made her tear her lips from his. His eyes were clouded with unbridled lust when she stood away from him. "Not here, Harry." She said in a breathless voice. He looked at her in bafflement for a moment before his mind cleared up and he remembered they were here for a reason.

"Sorry. I got carried away." He said breathlessly as he ran his hand through his hair and looked away. He was surprised when he felt her hands on his face, caressing his cheeks gently. He looked up and met her adoring gaze.

"It's okay. We can continue where we left off when we're alone in our room." Hermione promised. She turned away, walked to the bed to pick up the abandoned cage and called Charles. He appeared faithfully. She instructed him to take the cage straight to Lord Greengrass. He took it and disappeared instantly.

"Thank Merlin we have such efficient house elves." Harry whispered as he pressed a warm kiss on her ear as he wrapped his arms around her waist from behind tightly. Hermione felt his guilt and his shock when he saw the person lying on the ground.

Ginny Weasley lay on the ground, unconscious and pale from the stunning spell. His eyes grew to the size of twin saucers. He had stunned a person he considered a sister. Hermione spun around in his arms and looked at him with deep concern. He released Hermione immediately and knelt next to the unconscious body.

He looked across the room and saw Neville lying on the floor motionless. The sight made his stomach twist with guilt. His jaw tightened with emotions he was biting back.

"Harry?-"

"- We have to levitate them to the hospital wing." Harry interrupted dispassionately as he rose. He averted his eyes from the sight.

"Harry." Hermione continued gently. "You had no choice. I'm so sorry." She said as she touched his arm lovingly. She knew how much he cared for Ginny. The fact that Harry went into the Chamber of Secrets last year to save her, despite knowing the dangers he had to face, proved that he cared for her greatly.

Harry shook his head. "I'd do it again if I had to. I won't let anyone hurt you." He concluded as he cast the spell and levitated them off the ground.

"It doesn't mean you feel good about it," Hermione added quietly. Her overwhelming compassion made him snapped.

"Hermione, I'll be fine." Harry answered forcefully as he stared at her. "It's nothing compared to what you must've felt when she was threatening you. I know you're capable of disarming her even if you couldn't reach your wand. You didn't because you care for her too much." He answered brusquely. Harry averted his eyes from her. "I'm the reason why Ginny tried to hurt you. I'm the reason Neville was stunned." Harry concluded in frustration.

Harry shook his head as if he was trying to shake his feelings off. With a composed tone, he spoke, "We need to head to the Hospital wing. I think Professor McGonagall will meet us there as soon the other Gryffindors see them in this state."

There were certain things that Hermione was persistent about and not allowing Harry to wallow in his own guilt was one of them. She stood stubbornly in his way, so that he could not walk out on her.

"Harry, you are not the reason why Ginny tried to hurt me. Yes, she wanted to get me out of the picture because we are dating. That's because she was raised to be obsessed with you. She's got it in her head that's she is your future wife." Hermione said calmly.

"What?" Harry asked. He was taken aback.

"So she couldn't accept the fact that we're together." Hermione continued as if she was not interrupted. "The confrontation happened

because she was upset with me. She was furious with me because I'm dating you. Therefore, from my point of view, the only mistake that I think you've made is falling in love with me. Nothing would've happened if we were not in love. Do you consider falling in love with me as a mistake?" Hermione questioned rationally.

Harry sighed. "No, I don't, Mione. You know falling in love with you is the best thing that has happened in my life."

"Sweetheart, then it isn't your fault at all." Hermione whispered softly as she crossed the room. "You can't control everything, Harry. It's not right for you to take all the blame and feel guilty for it." Harry did not look her in the eye. "Ginny made the decision to hurt me and stun Neville." There was an underlying tone of profound sorrow as she spoke that statement.

The rowdy Gryffindor room became unnaturally still when they saw Harry and Hermione levitating two unconscious house mates out from the Boy's Dorm. Some of them had paled as they watched Harry and Hermione walked past them silently and out of the room.

The portrait swung ominously open as the young couple approached the entrance. They came face to face with the Head Boy. His face turned red with rage when he saw his unconscious sister.

"W-What happened...What did you do to my sister?" Percy demanded brusquely as he glared at Harry and he shoved him. Harry's eyes narrowed into incensed slits as he glared at the Head Boy.

"Don't touch me." Harry spoke softly. There was no mistake that it was a threat. Hermione placed her hand on his arm. The simple small physical contact made him relax.

"Harry isn't in the mood to talk. Come with us to the Hospital Wing if you're really worried about your sister." Hermione answered frostily as she shot a mildly incensed look at the Head boy. She laced her fingers with his as she held her hand and led Harry away from him.

However, Percy was persistent in not letting Harry go. He stood in front of him, blocking his way.

"If I find out you –"

"- I stunned her." Harry stated truthfully as he stared at the Head Boy. His face turned purple, the same shade Uncle Vernon would turn to when he was angry. There were sounds of people gasping at his admission in the room.

"I'm calling you out for hurting my sister." Percy declared as he glared at him.

"I'll honour it." Harry answered coldly as he scowled. He knew full well that Percy had called him out because of the incident that took place more than a month ago. He desperately wanted to deal damage to release the pent-up emotions in him and recklessly agreed. Hermione tugged him away before they started doing damage to each other.

Harry was right. Professor McGonagall and his other friends met him at the Hospital Wing, a few moments after they had arrived. Madame Pomfrey placed the two unconscious teenagers on beds. "What happened?" Professor McGonagall asked as she strode in briskly. "Miss Bones and Miss Greengrass updated me briefly. They said that you went out to meet Sirius and Miss Granger was at the tower with Mr. Longbottom to catch Pettigrew. What happened to them?" She asked as she gestured to the two beds.

"Ginny stunned Neville when she caught them kidnapping his rat. She tried to hurt Hermione, but I stopped her, stunning her in the process." He answered.

"Why would Miss Weasley want to hurt you, Miss Granger?" Professor McGonagall asked with worry lacing her tone. The teenagers grew quiet. Professor McGonagall could guess the answer. "Where is the rat?" She asked, switching the subject.

"They sent him to Lord Greengrass. He's with my aunt. They are at the Ministry, trying to appeal the case. If nothing goes wrong, they could have the trial very soon." Susan answered.

"That's great to hear. How's Sirius?" Professor McGonagall asked.

"He's fine, he's weak and very thin, but he's fine. We ran into a little problem when Professor Snape interfered -" Professor McGonagall's face turned livid at the name.

"- He wouldn't have let Sirius go without a fight."

"We didn't fight." Harry answered. "I had the impression he was there on Headmaster's orders."

"The headmaster might be under the notion that he was trying to protect you." Professor McGonagall added uncomfortably when she understood what Harry was hinting. "He was insistent about the idea that Sirius betrayed your parents-"

"- which he didn't. Sirius told me that, heeding Dumbledore's advice, he switched the secret keeper to Pettigrew. Professor Lupin was there, he heard that too." Harry interrupted. "Dumbledore knew that he was innocent."

"Why would he want an innocent man behind bars?" Professor McGonagall questioned.

"So that I couldn't live with Sirius. My mother never said anything about placing me in the care of my blood relatives. Sirius said that my mother would've never placed me in their custody because they knew that the Dursleys would mistreat me for being magical. Dumbledore could have his way in forcing me to live with my relatives, because Sirius, the appointed Guardian by my parents, was in Azkaban. The Dursleys were the next in line." Harry answered as he sat on one of the chair.

Hermione's face turned livid with anger. "It was his idea to put you there?" She asked quietly.

Professor McGonagall paled. She observed the Dursleys for a day and knew what kind of people they were. She tried to warn him but Dumbledore would have nothing of it. Dumbledore had assured her

that he was keeping tabs on Harry as he grew up. From Hermione's reaction, she had deduced that Dumbledore didn't.

"Why didn't you say anything when you first arrived in Hogwarts, Harry? I thought you were fine because Dumbledore sent someone to keep track of your well-being. " She asked gently as she looked at Harry. "Dumbledore assured me that it was fine for you to be so thin." She said sadly. "I'm so sorry, Harry."

"It's fine, Professor McGonagall. That's water under the bridge." Harry answered graciously.

There was a frown on the Professor's face. "This can't go on. I'm going to have a word with him. I can't comprehend his insistence in placing you in your nasty relatives' custody or on Sirius' guilt. I'll take it as I've never heard that you left Hogwarts without permission. I will speak to Miss Weasley's parents about her behaviour and decide on an appropriate punishment. As for the rest of you, I want you to return to your quarters to rest." She concluded curtly as she walked hurriedly out of the Hospital Wing in a bad temper.

"Black slipped out of your hands with Harry's help?" The Headmaster questioned in astonishment as he stared at the Potions master. The face of Severus Snape remained impassive after reporting the events that took place in the night.

Albus Dumbledore stood up and looked at him through his half-moon spectacles. There was a sombre expression on his ancient face.

"Did you find out what he was after, Severus?"

"A rat." He answered.

Dumbledore slumped into his chair in bafflement.

"He'd risk being caught by the Dementors for a rat?" The Headmaster asked. His white eyebrows were raised in surprise. Snape grew uncomfortable at the probing stare.

"I have no idea what's so special about the rat." He answered - his tone betrayed some of his nervousness at his lack of answer. "You remember the conversation we had before the school started. Remus Lupin was there when I went to the Shrieking Shack. He has been helping his old friend all this time. He tried to stop me from taking Black away. Both he and Potter claimed that Black is innocent."

Dumbledore had to keep a straight face when he said that. "From the sound of things, Harry might have discovered something and is convinced that he's innocent." He said gravely, stroking his long white beard." Did you know where he might have taken Black?" He questioned calmly.

"I have no idea. Potter asked a house elf to take him away." Before the Headmaster could answer, they were interrupted by the sight of Professor McGonagall marching furiously into the room. Her nostrils were white with anger. She was glaring at him with so much rage, that if looks could kill, Dumbledore would be dead.

"Albus, did you send Severus to follow Harry tonight?"

He blinked. "Well, yes, I did. One of the students had overheard his plans of leaving the school tonight and reported the incident to me. Severus was making sure that he wasn't breaking the rules. He saw Harry's house elf talking to Remus on his way out and he apparated to the Shrieking Shack. He could've been killed since Black was there tonight."

"Bollocks." She growled angrily as she glared at the Headmaster. "Do you think Remus is incapable of protecting a student? Besides, Sirius is no supporter of You-know-who. You know full well that he didn't betray the Potters. It was under your advice that he persuaded the Potters to switch secret keepers."

"I did advise him. I didn't think he would follow." Dumbledore answered evenly as he held her gaze for a moment. "Severus, I assume you had a long night, you can return to your room to rest. You have lessons tomorrow." He said warmly as he turned to the Potion Master.

"Yes, Headmaster." He answered softly as he retreated from the office.

There was a soft click, signalling that the door was shut and they were alone before McGonagall formally began her tirade.

"I'll give you the benefit of a doubt that you really didn't know. However, surely you must've known that Harry was being abused by his relatives since you've been keeping tabs on him?" The auburn hair witch demanded furiously as she glared at him.

His face turned livid at her words. "I-I didn't know. I was told that he was a mischievous kid like James was when he was young, so they punished him accordingly." He defended himself.

"It didn't occur to you that you ought to make sure? Why didn't you allow Lord Greengrass to check in on him?" She probed furiously.

"I didn't want to make the Dursleys feel uncomfortable, knowing that someone from our world was watching them. As for not allowing Lord Greengrass to visit, I didn't want the rest of the Magical World to know of Harry's whereabouts. The Greengrasses aren't exactly a light family-" He continued without any hesitation.

"- They'd never betray the Potters because their families made a pact! Surely you know that? It's a fact that all Wizarding families know. The Greengrass family or the Bones family would've take Harry in without a question if you hadn't put him with his relatives. Why did you?"

"He needs to be with his relatives for his safety." Dumbledore replied tiredly. "You have to trust me on that. He'll continue to be safe if he returns to his relatives yearly."

"Safety? From whom is he hiding?" She asked.

From the determined set of Dumbledore's jaw, she knew that he wouldn't tell her the reason. She sucked her breath in and closed her eyes. When she opened her eyes to look at him with her expression

glacial from the overwhelming anger, the Headmaster shuddered slightly. His stubbornness broke the last straw.

"Very well," said McGonagall curtly, "You've been keeping a lot of secrets. Because of your actions, some of our students could have been hurt when the Dementors were placed in the school to capture Sirius, an innocent man." McGonagall continued in an unusually even voice.

"Minerva," he pleaded in a quiet tone. "It was for Harry's own good."

"From Miss Granger's – I mean, Mrs. Potter's reaction, I doubt that they'll agree with you. If you try to meddle with his life, I'll bring your negligence into the attention of the school board. By the way, it is better that you ignore everything that's happened tonight. I will deal with it appropriately. There's no need for you to get involved." She threatened as she turned away. "I'm no longer going to blindly believe every word you say, Headmaster. Good night." With those parting words, she walked out of the office.

His assistant had just flipped the tables on him, Dumbledore thought in regret. Why couldn't they understand it was all for the greater good? Lord Greengrass' parting words rang in his head. He knew that the Head of the Ancient and Noble family of the Greengrass would do what he'd threatened. His reputation would be in shambles when the Magical World discovered that he had placed the wrong man in the Azkaban. He looked out of the window and pondered his actions.

Hedwig was not able to reach Hermione before Harry did. She was upset with herself for missing most of the action since she was delivering a letter from the Grangers. She placed the letter on Harry's desk and took the liberty of waking Luna up. The second year immediately dashed to the hospital wing to check on Neville when she realised that he was in the Hospital wing. Fred and George, after recovering from the shock of seeing their sister unconscious, went to the hospital wing to stay with their sister.

It was past curfew when Harry and Hermione finally returned to their quarters with heavy hearts. They willingly left the place when Madam Pomfrey assured them that Neville and Ginny would be fine by the

morning. It had been a long and difficult day for them. Hermione had been quiet since the Boy's dorm. Both felt the emotional turbulence and heard each other's disjointed cloud of thoughts, but neither of them was willing to talk about it.

Even though Hermione had physically closed the gap between them when she walked across the room and stroked his face in the Boy's Dorm, but there was still an emotional rift between them. It was making the room unbearably uncomfortable with their rising tension.

"Hermione, I'm sorry for being so harsh on you in the Boy's dorm" Harry began quietly as he sat by the window in their room. He raked through his hair with his fingers tiredly. "You're right. I shouldn't think that I'm to be blame for what happened. I just can't help feeling upset that I had to stun her. Don't get me wrong, I'd do it again without any hesitation if it meant I'd be protecting you." He whispered dejectedly as he lifted his head to look at her. "It's just - she's like a sister to me."

There was silence between them as they gazed into each other's eyes. Their eyes reflected both their pain and understanding.

"She was the first girl who was friendly to me. I see her as a sister, because she is Ron's sister. I... I have no idea how our relationship deteriorated to this state." Hermione whispered. His forehead lay on hers. "I can't fathom what the consequences would be if she knew more powerful offensive spells. It's unthinkable. The malice, the jealousy..." Hermione murmured in anguish.

I'm sorry, they thought in unison as they lifted their heads slightly so that they could look into each other's eyes.

Getting the weight off their chest was therapeutic.

Their lips met in a slow and drugging kiss as they wrapped their arms around each other. Harry lifted her so that her slim legs could wrap around his hips as he carried them to their bed. They tumbled into the large bed together, their lips still fused together in a growing passion. All thoughts of others and faded from their mind as they got lost in the special and beautiful universe where nothing else existed except the two of them.

Harry collapsed into the bed as he held Hermione close to him. She immediately wiggled into her favourite spot, resting her cheek on his chest as his arms went around her. Her eyelids felt unusually heavy and his strong soothing heart beat was lulling her to sleep.

"Why did you put up the mental barriers when you were in trouble?" He asked pensively.

"I didn't want you to find out what was happening." She answered tiredly as she gave a sleepily yawn.

"Please don't ever do that again. You'll have me worried." He admonished gently as he lifted her chin so that she was looking at him.

"That sounds awfully familiar, Harry." She giggled lightly.

"I'm not surprised. It seems that we've switched roles for tonight. Promise me, honey." He said solemnly as he looked into her eyes. Hermione could see that he really meant it.

Hermione nodded. "You'll have my promise as long as you promise to do the same."

"I promise." He answered as an answering smile played at the corners of his lips. "Good night, milady." He whispered lovingly.

"Good night, my love." She murmured sleepily as she snuggled closer to him.

Breakfast at the dining hall was a strange affair. Tale of the event that took place last night in the Boy Dorm had leaked out to the rest of the house. The Gryffindors were struggling to come into terms with the news. Never was there a confrontation between students of the same house. The idea that Ginny had stunned Neville and threatened Hermione shocked them. The news of the impending Wizard's Duel between Percy and Harry spread like a raging wildfire. In a span of a few minutes, everyone in the school knew of it.

Harry and Hermione arrived in the dining hall with wide smiles plastered on their face as they sat at their table. It was as if nothing had happened the previous night. Luna, Daphne, Susan and Neville and the Weasley twins joined them for the meal. Fred and George tried to apologise to Hermione and Harry on their sister's behalf, but Harry had stopped them. They had forgiven her. Neither of them could bear a grudge against the youngest Weasley and they wanted to put the matter behind them. Harry had stunned Ginny and they could call it quits.

They quickly updated each other on the events of the previous night until the usual flock of owls began to fly through the hall, delivering the mail. There was an edition of the Wizarding newspaper, The Daily Prophet, attached to a letter addressed to Harry, Hermione, Susan and Daphne. The sight of front page shocked them into immobility.

The headline went, "Trial For Alleged Mass Murderer, Sirius Black, Starts Today" In the article, it had stated there was new and strong evidence presented to suggest that Black was innocent of all the charges and he would be given a trial later that afternoon. In addition, all Dementors were recalled to the Ministry. They briefly stated the charges that he was jailed for.

"Yes!" Harry shouted victoriously as he pumped his hand into the air after he finished reading the article. All their efforts were not in vain. There were triumphant smiles on their faces as they read the article.

"No more Dementors!" Luna said with invigorating excitement. The news lifted their spirits. They hurried to open the envelope. It was from Lord Greengrass, giving a blow by blow account of last night.

Lord Greengrass and Lady Bones decided to act immediately because Charles had told him the circumstances in which he had retrieve Sirius. They took the rat to Minister Fudge without delay and convinced the Minister that Pettigrew was alive by transforming him back to a human. The sight of Peter Pettigrew was enough to convince him that Lady Bones was indeed speaking the truth when she came to see him the day before, requesting that Dementors to be removed from the premises of Hogwarts. Together, they appealed for a trial and it was approved in an instant.

Harry whipped his head to the front, where the long staff table stood. He nodded the absent of the headmaster. He must be called to attend the trial. Professor Lupin was flashing a wide smile at him as he pointed to the newspaper. Harry smiled back and nodded. "I hope he gets his freedom today."

"Well, he'll be acquitted of all charges when they can't pin anything on him, Harry." Susan assured. "I guess they have to retract Pettigrew's Order of Merlin when the trial is over."

"I hope you're ready for the duel, Potter." A voice interrupted from the side. Harry did not have to look up to know who the speaker was. "I thought it was better to settle everything today."

Harry grudgingly stood up and faced the pompous Head Boy, trailing behind him was Ron, who had an irate expression on his face. Harry wanted to be hurt for hurting Ginny yesterday, but after last night, that feeling wear off and he regretted agreeing.

"Percy and Ron - don't be such pig heads and call it off." One of the twins interrupted in an exasperating tone.

"Are you even Ginny's brothers? They besmirched her name. Do you know what everyone is saying about her? She stunned Neville so that she could confront Hermione alone for being with Harry. It's no doubt his doing!" He spat as he pointed his finger at Harry.

He rolled his eyes slightly at the accusation. "Merlin, I love Ginny like a sister." Harry answered in frustration.

"Every word of that tale is true." Neville said courageously as he stood up and glared at Percy.

"Why were you, Hermione, there in the Boy's Dorm in the first place? Ginny said she was trying to stop you from stealing Ron's rat!" Percy scowled.

"I searched everywhere for Scabbers. I can't find him. You must've taken him. You may get away with your stroll outside the Castle after

dark, but you can't escape from stealing my rat, hurting my sister and sullyng her name." Ron spat as he glared at him.

"You tattled on me to the Headmaster," Harry spoke quietly as his gaze turned chilly. Harry could have explained their need for his rat and its identity. However, the thought of Sirius and Lupin almost being caught by the Dementors last night made him lost control of his temper. He swallowed visibly as he turned away.

"Your hero complex along with your new-found fame and status as Lord Potter has given you a swollen head. It's time that someone deflates that pride. I still think you're slightly insane, talking to that ugly cat!" Everyone from his table stood up in rage at Ron's statement.

Percy and Ron backed away from them slightly.

"Professor McGonagall," Harry began in a stern voice as he turned to the front. "I believe that we're allowed to duel for personal reasons? We're both recognised as adults." He said.

"Harry, "Hermione began as she lay her hand on his arm, "Don't do this."

"Yes, but I do hope you consider issues amicably in private instead of a public wizard duel." Professor McGonagall answered. "I do not wish to see students duelling against each other. Is there no other way?"

"My wand demands satisfaction for the tarnishing of my sister's reputation and thus my family's reputation and the injury dealt to her." Percy answered.

"I do not deny his request." Harry answered sombrely. He had enough of their jealousy.

Professor McGonagall shook her head. "The matter is not yet settled, I have not fully investigated what happened."

"Professor, the fact still stands he hurt my sister. He admitted that in front the entire house."

“So I did.” Harry answered. “I’m sorry, Professor, for disregarding your advice. I’ll not withdraw from the duel.” He continued apologetically as he bowed deeply.

“Ron is my second.” Percy answered curtly.

Harry turned around and looked at his friends. He knew that they would be his second willingly. Hermione was out because of their combined power. Weasley twins were out because he didn’t want to pit them against their brothers.

“Neville, would you like to be my second?” He asked sincerely as he looked at his housemate. Neville blinked in surprise at his choice.

“Me, Harry? I can’t duel. I might hurt you instead.” Neville added frantically.

“You know just as many spells as Ron, you’ll be fine.” He assured. “I really need the emotional support from a friend.” He continued as the corner of his lips lifted up slightly. Neville took a deep breath and continued, “If you insist-“

“- Neville is my second.” Harry declared proudly. There was a loud collective gasp.

“Professor Lupin, since you are in charge of Defence against Dark Arts, please take charge.” Professor McGonagall said in a resigned tone.

“Yes, Professor McGonagall.” Professor Lupin nodded.

A/N: Hi everyone, thank you for your reviews. Thank you, frustr8dwriter for the good work. All previous chapters have been edited. Well, please comment on this chapter too. Have a nice week.

Chapter 15

Beta-read by frustr8dwriter

The slightly weary-looking Professor hesitantly pushed his chair back and climbed onto his feet. His eyebrows were knitted into a frown as he fixed his eyes on his nephew. There was an air of indifference about the way the black-haired wizard stood. However, tense fix of his jaw gave him away - it was as if Harry was biting back several emotions to keep his face impassive. "Mr. Weasley and Mr. Potter, are you certain that you want to go through with a Wizard's duel? As Professor McGonagall suggested, it's better to wait for things to settle down before calling each other out. I'm sure the people involved in the events that took place last night knew of the risks and wouldn't want the two of you to duel. Mr. Weasley, won't you consider retracting that offer?" The young professor spoke, with concern lacing his tone as he looked at the vengeful Head Boy.

"Professor, I do not wish to retract my challenge. This is my final decision. I demand satisfaction now." The Head Boy responded pompously. From the stubborn set of his chin, the Professor knew that his mind was set. He sighed at the futility of an inevitable duel between the two teenagers. No doubt, this duel would widen rift between the members of the Gryffindor house.

"Very well," concluded Professor Lupin gravely when he noted the lack of response from Harry. "In that case, please prepare for this duel." With a swish of his wand, a duelling platform appeared in the middle of the large dining hall. "Please take your sides now. You must bow to each other before facing your opponent, and then at my count of three, you can start to fire your spells."

"Be careful, Harry." Hermione whispered in concern as her grip on his arm increased, as if to emphasise the point. Turning away, Harry, accompanied by Neville, quietly walked to one side of the platform as Percy and Ron made their way to the other side. Harry understood that Percy was upset because of what happened to Ginny, but could not comprehend the reason behind that fierce and slightly mad gleam in his brown eyes when he and Percy locked their gazes on each

other as they made their way up the short flight of stairs and onto the platform.

They stood at each end, facing each other.

“Bow.”

Harry lowered himself into a curt bow as Percy reflected his actions.

“You may start firing your spells at the count of three- “

There was a flicker of madness in his eyes when Harry looked at him. Snape had born the same expression when Sirius disappeared right in front of his eyes.

“Why?-" Harry questioned.

“-Three,-“

“-Penny can't help singing praises about you despite what you have done. It was all about you.-“

“-Two,-“

A dumbfounded expression crossed Harry's face. “- And you hate me because of that?-"

“-Yes.-“Percy answered succinctly as the gleam in his eyes grew wilder.

“One!”

The Head Boy's response made him came up with an alternate plan. Harry did not want to give him that satisfaction of truly duelling against him. Harry immediately dropped into a roll to duck a stunning spell cast by Percy, which flew past him. Harry climbed nimbly to his feet and conjured a stone statue that looked suspiciously like a boy. Before anyone could take a good look at the granite statue, it was blasted into pieces when Percy shouted “Reducto”. Harry took the time to conjure an identical granite statue. The second was blown

apart minutes after the first was destroyed in a similar fashion- Percy furiously cast a 'reducto' spell, shattering the statue. Harry instantly conjured another statue of same build and height. His continued creation of stone sculptures during a wizard's duel caught the attention of everybody in the hall.

There was a buzz in the hall as the audience tried to make out what Harry was doing, much to the annoyance of his opponent.

"What the hell are you trying to play at, Potter?" Percy hissed as he stopped destroying the statues Harry was conjuring in rapid speed.

"Hush, I need to perfect this," said Harry crossly. "I think he should lose the round spectacles." He thought aloud as he stroked his chin thoughtfully with a hand and flicked his wand idly with the other. The stone round lenses of the glasses the figure wore transformed into a stylish rectangle-framed spectacles. "It looks much better now." Harry muttered in approval as he took a step back to admire his masterpiece. By then, everyone realised what he was doing - Harry was conjuring replicas of himself for Percy to destroy.

Percy's face turned crimson when he discovered what Harry was up to. The statues bore a striking resemblance to their creator. If they were in a classroom setting, Percy would have admired the speed that Harry had conjured stone shields from thin air and transfigured them into perfect imitations of himself.

"Why are you stopping?" Harry asked in exaggerated surprise as he conjured another granite statue. This time, it was of him riding his broomstick. There were murmurs of approval at his fine transfiguration work.

"Get serious," spat Percy as his face turned into a deeper shade of red.

Harry looked at him innocently. "I was doing my best to create duplications of myself so that you can derive some satisfaction from blowing up the Boy-Who-Lived. I hear it's very therapeutic." Turning to face Ron, he continued, "Ron, you're welcome to join in. To participate, point your wand to the desired stone statue and shout

‘Reducto’. Please remember to stress the second syllable.” He offered kindly as he went back to his task. There was a raucous of laughter when Percy, in his attempt to injure him, blasted another granite statue into pieces.

Harry realised that the Ron’s face became as red as the roots of his hair. “You coward, fight like a real man instead of conjuring statues to protect your skin!”

“Well, I’m defending myself, can’t you see?” Harry pointed out. As if to highlight the purpose of conjuring stone statues, one of the sculptures was neatly beheaded by Percy’s ‘Diffindo’.

“Try creating an imitation of you dealing the finishing blow to a basilisk.” Neville suggested, getting into the spirit.

“I don’t know how I looked then,” Harry answered as he frowned thoughtfully. “I think I’ll create one of myself casting a spell.” With that he fashioned another stone sculpture doing exactly that.

“No, you frown in concentration whenever you cast spells,” commented Neville as he looked at Harry’s work.

“Oh?” Harry answered as he transfigured the figure to frown, “Like this?”

“Uh-huh. It looks exactly like you now.” Neville affirmed. The finished product looked exactly like a sombre-looking Harry Potter raising his stone wand and pointing it at Percy.

“Are you mocking me, Potter, by not raising your wand against me? We are supposed to duel.” Percy bellowed in rage.

Harry stared meaningfully at the newly created granite sculpture then at Percy. The dining hall instantly burst into another round of laughter. “Don’t tie your tail into a knot. We will resume our battle once you start destroying my creations again,” answered Harry plainly. “Technically, I’m creating statues that coincidentally look like me to defend myself from your scary spells. Anyway, if we are supposed to

duel, why aren't you doing anything?" He pointed out innocently. It incited a round of sniggers from the hall.

His face turned purple with rage at his witty response. Everyone in the hall knew that it took more magic and skill to do what Harry was doing easily compared to the offensive spells that Percy was wildly throwing.

He decided to try another approach. "What? Too timid to attack me in front of everyone after you attacked my sister?" Percy mocked irately.

"I only stunned Ginny to protect Hermione. If you were to see Ginny pointing her wand at the neck of a certain Miss Penelope Clearwater, I'm sure your reaction would be similar to mine."

"-Lies!-" He spat as he tossed a stunning spell. It hit another stone statue. To Harry's surprise, the granite sculpture absorbed the spell.

"Ask your sister to tell you the truth." Harry answered coolly as he folded his arms.

"Why you! Eat slugs!" Ron growled as he threw the spell at Harry from the side. Harry adroitly dodged to the side and the spell hit another stone figure.

"Now now, if you really want it to eat slugs, you have to be more forceful about it." Harry added as he transfigured the sculpture that Ron's spell had hit. "Oops, I forgot that I've never seen myself vomiting those awful things. Will this do?" Harry asked.

Instead of statue being another Harry, it was a model of Ron vomiting slugs. Laughter rang through the hall when everyone looked at it. It was a very detailed sculpture since Harry could remember the incident quite well. It took place a year ago: Ron began to vomit slugs when his spell backfired.

His ears turned bright red with fury. Ron hissed heatedly as he tried to lunge at Harry from the side of the platform but he missed. He crashed with a loud 'thud' on the stage. He scrambled awkwardly onto his feet, momentarily forgetting that he was a wizard, he tried to

punch him with all his might. Harry ducked his punch and Ron stumbled off the platform. Hagrid immediately dragged the redhead away from Harry.

“Tha’s no’ honourable. Come on,” Hagrid said gruffly.

“Get off me!” Ron shouted as he struggled in Hagrid’s gigantic arms. However, the struggling against his steel-like grip was futile.

Harry nodded in appreciation for Hagrid’s actions.

“Harry! Watch out!”

He hurriedly summoned one of the stone statues to protect his undefended side. It exploded into pieces a moment immediately it was summoned. Percy tried to make use of the confusion to land a spell on him.

“Trying to sneak a hit on me while I’m distracted by Ron, Percy? If you wanted my attention, all you had to do is ask.” Harry answered icily. Of all types of people, Harry didn’t like opportunists without an ounce of integrity the most.

“Who wants attention from you?” He asked angrily as he panted. “It’s considered a fair fight if you choose not to pay attention to your opponent.” He defended hotly as he cast another fruitless spell onto the stone statue. It shared the unfortunate fate as the other sculptures before it – it was blasted to pieces. Percy’s face was tomato red from exhausting too much magical energy. It seemed that his reckless tossing of spells was costing him.

“From the way you’ve been so obsessed with me, it’s not hard to figure out that you really want attention from me. I mean, you called me out for a duel not because you are really defending your family’s honour but because you can’t stand the praises you hear about me from your girlfriend. Your brother Ron isn’t any better - he’s always wanted what I have. Need I say more?” Harry answered frostily.

There was no playful twinkle in his eyes. Harry seemed to emanate an intense aura of sheer power and that sent shivers down Percy’s

spine. Incapacitated by fear, he lost his ability to speak and was unable to refute his claims.

“Cat got your tongue?” Harry said with arched brows.

Knowing that his opponent was reaching his magical limits soon, Harry took pity on him. He ended the whole duel by disarming him easily. The wand flew out of Percy’s hand to a corner of the hall.

It was like Déjà vu – a defenceless Percy glaring at him with contempt for the humiliation.

The only difference was there was no headmaster to stop the duel between them. Harry walked towards him, after banishing all his conjurations with a flick of his wand, so that Percy could hear his next words clearly.

“To answer the question if I was mocking you, Head Boy. I didn’t have to mock you to make you look bad- your actions did. You’re not worth my time.” He answered softly. “We’ve had enough of your foolish acts. Leave me, Hermione, and all my friends alone.” Harry concluded as he retracted his wand. “This duel is over.” Harry announced loudly as he walked down the platform.

Neville happily clapped his hand on his back when he followed Harry down the stage towards the Gryffindor table. Harry made a blatant error when he underestimated his opponent and turned his back on him.

Percy, in his rage and desperation to salvage his pride, channelled all his magical energy to summon his wand. The wand, like a faithful eager puppy, heeded his master’s command and flew into his hand.

There was a loud grasp in the hall.

“Diffindo!” He pointed the spell at Harry and Neville.

Harry only had a split second to react- he pushed Neville out of the way. The spell missed him by inches and made a large deep slash

on the wall at the back of the hall. A part of the wall crumbled into pieces due to the fault, creating a large hole near the entrance.

Harry leapt up from his position, his eyes an intense green with anger. He was about to cast a spell when he saw Percy collapse onto the platform from the overexertion of his magical core. One of the Professors hurried over to levitate him to the hospital wing. In the midst of the confusion, Professor Lupin announced Harry's victory.

"You alright?" Harry questioned as he frowned in concern as he helped his friend up. "I should've remembered he's seventh year. They are encouraged to do magic without wand."

"I'm fine, Harry." Neville answered in a shaken voice. "We'd already stepped off of the platform. It's against the rules to attack you," Neville said.

"Yes, it is." Harry answered.

"Remind me never to cross you, Harry." Neville commented softly. "How did you learn to transfigure like that?" He asked curiously.

It brought a smile to his lips. "My father taught me the secret behind it." Harry answered. "The key to Transfiguration lies in the imagination." Harry continued as he tapped on his temple to stress the point.

"I've never caught you staring at the reflection of yourself in the mirror. How is it that you are able to reproduce an accurate copy of yourself?" Neville questioned.

"Hermione pays a lot of attention to details." Harry answered nonchalantly as he approached their table. Hermione thought of him often, as such he was able to see himself through her eyes. He briefly glanced through the table, searching for the only one whose opinion mattered the most to him. His eyes fell only on Hermione.

Her arms were draped across her front as she watched at him with worry written across her face.

"I'm fine, Mione. I've just learned an important lesson - a desperate man takes desperate measures." He answered her probing stare. Harry was engulfed by Hermione's bone-crushing embrace.

"I know that you're capable of handling yourself," whispered Hermione before she moved away from him. "I think I should hex him properly for that low-down attack. It was completely dishonourable." She continued.

"I'll guess that have to wait. He's spending at least a month in the Hospital Wing for exhausting his magical core – that is, if our professors got him to Madam Pomfrey in time." Harry replied as he shrugged.

"He deserves it." Daphne interjected. "I can't believe anyone would be stupid enough to risk his own life in a duel over such a petty matter." Susan expressed her agreement on her sentiments.

Harry grinned when he saw an amused smile tug at the corner of Hermione's lips.

"I think the duel revealed a hidden side of you. I didn't think you were that much of a prankster. It's refreshing."

"I'm glad that you approved it, milady." He answered as he lifted her hand to his lips. "I was considering hexing them into pieces or just having a good laugh at their expense. I decided the latter and honour the Marauders. I was once told that laughing is very good for health."

"I'm sure everybody will be pink with health after this morning's entertainment." Hermione said as she wrapped her arms around his waist.

"Hermione, you should be glad that you have such a protective lover. Harry ought to be placed in Slytherin for moves like that. It was the best way to get back at the Weasleys. Besides, the display of your skills and your power sent a clear warning to the rest of the school that you won't hesitate to hurt anyone who tries to harm Hermione." Daphne said with admiration lacing her tone.

Hermione thought, Thank you. She gazed at him adoringly.

“Hey, remember that I was given a choice between the two houses.” Harry announced as he entwined his fingers with hers.

“What an awesome prank!-“ One of the Weasley twins began with wide smiles splitting their faces as they stood up.

“Looks like we’ve been outclassed -” continued the other.

“- Deserving of the offspring of the greatest Pranksters that Hogwarts has ever seen.” The concluded together.

“Thanks for the compliment,” answered Harry as he bowed in appreciation when Hermione let go of his hand and sat down. “I hope you won’t get in trouble with your family.”

“No worries, Harry. My siblings needed to be taught a lesson. We’re nothing if we’re not loyal.” The Weasley twins answered exaggeratedly as they shot a side glance at Neville. He was sitting beside Luna, engrossed in a conversation with her when they commented. However, Neville heard the retort and chuckled.

“Where did you get the idea of conjuring duplicates of you for them to destroy?” Luna questioned when Harry sat down.

“It was actually from a cartoon I watched at Hermione’s house. The Muggle World is a wealth of ideas.” He shrugged, eating his meal as if nothing had taken place.

“I’ll have to agree. Things like shopping malls can improve our lives. I’ve even owed to my father to consider building one in Diagon Alley.” Daphne answered as she sipped her goblet of pumpkin juice. She offered Harry more food as she observed him.

She was in awe of the level of magical power he had at this age. He had conjured and transfigured many statues but looked as if he had not exerted any magic at all.

The level of noise in the hall returned to pre-battle level as everyone eagerly talked about the wizard duel that just taken place. Harry's breakfast was disrupted by the Gryffindor Quidditch team congratulating him for the brilliant victory.

The jovial crowd parted when Professor McGonagall walked towards them.

"Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, Mr. Longbottom, and both Mr. Weasleys, I need you all in my office after breakfast. You'll be excused from your morning lessons." Professor McGonagall said when she reached the table. "Mr. Potter, that was a brilliant display of transfiguration. It was going to be the next lesson I wanted to teach all of you." She commented quietly with a twinkle in her eyes. "Well, I'll expect you to be on much better behaviour. Please refrain from duelling with other students in the future." She added sternly. "We'll speak more about this when we're alone." She left the group alone as she walked out of the dining hall, repairing the wall with a flick of her wand as she walked past it.

"I don't like the sound of this." Neville commented as he watched Professor McGonagall go.

"You'll be fine, you haven't done anything wrong," assured Luna as she looked at him with mild interest. "After all, she doesn't seem to be too cross with Harry for crossing a few lines over the past couple of days."

They were not surprised to find Arthur and Molly Weasley sitting with Ron and Ginny in front of Professor McGonagall's desk when they arrived. A wide beam split the woman's face when she saw Harry. She tried to engulf him in her usual smothering hug, but Harry deftly avoided it and gave his attention to his Professor. "You wanted to see us, Professor?"

"Hello, Mum and Dad," greeted the Weasley twins in unity.

"Up to another prank I suppose?" Mrs Weasley asked as she looked at them warily. "Have you gotten the rest of your family into trouble?"

"It wasn't the twins this time. I called you here about Miss Weasley." Professor McGonagall interjected from her desk when she recognised the look on Mrs Weasley's face - she was about to give the twins a lecture. A frown of confusion crossed her face.

"Ginny?" She echoed as she looked at the Assistant Headmistress then at her only daughter. She guiltily avoided her mother's eye.

"Yes, I also need to speak to you about the two other Mr. Weasleys. We'll talk about Miss Weasley first." Professor McGonagall responded as she stood up and took out a pensieve. "I'm conducting an enquiry into the events that took place last night in Hogwarts. Would anyone like to share their memory?" Professor McGonagall offered. Neville and Harry both offered theirs. Professor McGonagall guided Neville on copying the particular memory from his head and transferring it into the pensieve.

Harry took his wand, extracted the correct memory from his head and placed it in the vial provided. The three adults dived into the two short memories. After a while, the elder Weasleys with ashen faces stared at their daughter.

"You wanted to kill Hermione?" Mr. Weasley blurted in disbelief. "Why?"

Ginny averted her face from her father's intense gaze. Harry noted that her mother looked uneasy. He had no doubt that Molly Weasley understood her daughter's motive.

"Ginny wanted Hermione to die?" Ron asked incredulously as he stood up from his seat. "That can't be true. Are you sure that the memory wasn't tampered with?" He demanded.

Hermione wanted to step and shed light on the matter but Harry cautioned her. The matter is out of our hands. You don't need to interfere. Harry answered.

"Yes, Ron. She was pressing a wand to Hermione's neck in the memory. There's no mistake." Arthur clarified. The youngest son merely gaped.

"I'll give you time to talk to Miss Weasley about it, Arthur. Moving on, I've to talk about the conduct of your two sons." Professor McGonagall continued brusquely. "It's not a behaviour I would believe coming from a Head Boy but the elder Mr. Weasley thought it was fit to challenge Mr. Potter to a Wizard's duel with the youngest Mr. Weasley as his second. Did he have your permission to do so?"

Arthur raised his brows at her statement as he stared at Ron. "No, he didn't. Where is he?"

"He's currently in the Hospital Wing. He overexerted his magical core. This is my copy of my memory of the duel."

The two Weasley parents immediately dived in to watch the memory.

"I can't believe my eyes. Percy tried to sneak an attack on him? He tried to injure Harry after the duel was concluded?" Arthur said in a dazed voice. He could not believe that his sensible son would do something like that. "Ron, what were you doing when you were trying to leap at Harry?"

"He was making fun of me!" He spluttered as his face turned redder. "Not only did that, he stole my rat!" Ron argued loudly as he pointed his finger at Harry.

"Your rat was actually a wizard who is being tried today. What were you and Percy thinking when you declared a Wizard's duel? You are not allowed to declare one without my permission your lives still belong to me." He said. He took a deep breath and rubbed the temples gently.

The confused expression on Ron's face was telling so Arthur dived into an explanation.

"When you declare a Wizard's duel, you are asking for the satisfaction of your wand for the honour lost. Honour can only be redeemed by the death of the offender. Since both of you are still in school and neither of you are the Head of your family, then your lives

belong to me. You can't go around declaring a Wizard's duel with anyone you see." Arthur explained evenly.

Harry considered Mr. Weasley's words. "So Ron, Percy, and Ginny owe a life debt to me?" He asked.

"Yes, Lord Potter. To be honest, we are all in your debt when you spared Percy," Arthur Weasley added tiredly.

"I want a promise from you, Mr. Weasley as the Patriarch of the Weasley Family. I don't want your errant children to bother me, Hermione, and my friends. I'm tired of the stupid things they do to make our lives difficult. If you don't mind, I'd like to enjoy the rest of my years at Hogwarts." Harry stated firmly.

"You can't! I'm not being the prick. He's..." Ron shouted in desperation.

"Silence!" The Head of the Weasley family shouted. The face of the mild tempered man was red with rage. "Haven't you got into enough trouble?" He snapped as he fixed his glare on his offspring. He took a deep breath and faced Harry. "I apologise for their have it on my word, Lord Gryffindor. I'll make sure that they do not repeat such a mistake." He answered as he glared at his two children.

Harry could help but feel mildly satisfied seeing Ron being reduced to a whimpering idiot.

"I also suggest that you spend more time with your family. It's clear that you don't really going on with your family." Harry concluded as he shot a side glance at Mrs. Weasley. Mr Weasley caught his eye and nodded.

"I think you may be right, Lord Potter. I will definitely consider that." answered Mr. Weasley as he glanced at his wife. She was unusually quiet for someone who was loud.

"That settles most of our business here, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. I assume you want to see Mr. Weasley?" Professor McGonagall asked.

"Of course. Would it be too much to ask for permission to bring my children back home with me? I need to have a nice long talk with them." Arthur spoke as he stood up.

"Not at all. Will a day be sufficient?" Professor McGonagall asked.

"Yes, it would be. Hermione and Mr. Longbottom, will you be bringing this issue to Wizengamot?" Arthur asked as he looked at them.

"No, I won't." Neville replied from the corner.

"I won't either." Hermione answered as she shook her head.

"Thank you. Ginny owes you a life debt, Hermione." Arthur Weasley answered as he sighed. "We shall take our leave. We'll use the fireplace in the Hospital Wing to floo out later." He concluded. He stood up and led his family out of the office. "Thank you for your time, Professor McGonagall. Have a nice day." He said solemnly before he shut the door.

"Mr. Longbottom, you may go on to your next lesson. I believe you are still in time for your Defence Against the Dark Arts class. I need to speak to Mr. Potter and Miss Granger." Professor McGonagall spoke suddenly as she gestured them to the vacant seats and conjured up some tea. Neville left office.

"I have obtained memory of the events that took place outside the Castle from Remus. I believe that Professor Snape, Professor Lupin, and Mr. Black are all indebted to you for your quick thinking." Professor McGonagall began. "As for what happened this morning, I have nothing to add about Wizard duels except to point out that if a person from one family has declared it against another, it usually signals the start of a family feud."

Professor McGonagall took a sip from her cup of tea before changing the subject. "I have another memory that I'd like to share with both of you" She said as she took her wand and placed the tip of it at her temple. A white misted swirled around her wand and she placed it into the pensive.

“Feel free to have a look,” suggested Professor McGonagall. The teenagers dived into the memory of the conversation she’d had with the Headmaster.

“Wow, no one would doubt that you’re a real Gryffindor.” Harry whistled after he finished viewing the memory.

“Why did you choose to show this memory to us, Professor?” Hermione asked as she looked at her Transfiguration Professor.

“I thought that Harry should find the reasons behind the Headmaster’s actions.”

“I doubt he actually did all that because he was concerned for my safety. How safe was I from the Dursleys’ threats while I was staying with them?” Harry commented as he ran his hand through his hair.

“Unfortunately, you’ll have to speak to the Headmaster about this if you want the whole story. It won’t be an easy feat.” Professor McGonagall warned.

“He’s not the only one I’ve ever dealt who is stubborn.” Harry returned.

“I’ve decided that I am not going to punish anyone from last night except to insist that Miss Weasley talk to Madam Pomfrey soon about her unnatural obsession with you. Mr. Weasley will have to undergo a probation period as Head Boy in light of the recent revelations about his character. I must insist that you at least inform me if you feel a need to take an evening stroll outside of Hogwarts. You may be a Lord but you’re still a Hogwarts student.”

The two nodded in agreement.

“I guess you’ve probably heard the news by now. Sirius’ trial will begin in an hour’s time.”

“Yes, Lord Greengrass sent us a letter about it this morning.” Harry answered with a broad smile on his face.

"Well done there, Harry and Hermione. You may return to your classes. By the way, Harry, I'd like to see the Quidditch cup on my desk this year. The first match is on Saturday. Try not to get into any trouble before then."

Harry smirked rakishly. "I'll try my best, as usual."

"Thank you, Professor. If it helps I'll keep an eye on him." Hermione replied as she looked at Harry.

"Thank you, Mrs. Potter." Professor McGonagall beamed.

Harry and Hermione joined Neville and Susan at Charms. Professor Flitwick complimented Harry excitedly about his great charms work, much to his embarrassment. For their lesson, the class was taught the spell to conjure up stone walls to defend themselves against unfriendly spells. The diminutive Professor took the opportunity to award him with House points when he asked Harry to do a demonstration.

"You should've attended Professor Lupin's lesson. He taught a lesson on duelling. He briefly talked about how to use the environment when in battle to give you the best possible advantage. He gave us quite a bit of tips. I think he wants to move on to practical application of magic after we've covered the entire syllabus on Magical creatures." Neville commented as he conjured a stone wall. With Harry's guidance, he was able to conjure the granite shields.

"I'm not surprised since our Head boy, a seventh year student, has trouble duelling. After all, he's supposed to be the best student of his year. Speaks volumes about the education we're receiving from Hogwarts, don't you think?" Susan chuckled as she conjured her own stone wall with Hermione's help.

"No offense, Susan, but it's not as if we really need those skills," Ernie Macmillan interjected from the side. "We are living in such peaceful times so training to duel and protect ourselves seems too over the top. It feels as if we're preparing for war, something the older generation is desperately trying to forget."

"Well, I think it's a good thing that we are learning to fend for ourselves." Susan challenged.

"Hear hear, I believe that's exactly what our Professors are trying to do. They are teaching us apply what we learn in the classrooms to our lives." Neville answered.

Their conversation ceased when Professor Flitwick came over to observe their work and approve them. "Mr. Macmillan, you'll have to try harder." He said when he realised that Ernie could not conjure a stone shield.

"Yes, Professor." He responded as he focused his attention on casting the spell. When the tiny Professor left them, Ernie spoke. "By the way, Harry. I wanted to let you know that I admire the courage you've displayed as you build bridges between the other houses, especially since your House mates are so resistant to the idea. It has been inspiring. Well, most of Hufflepuff disagree with the idea, but I think you got it right. We're Hogwarts students above anything else."

"Thank you, Ernie." Harry replied with a warm smile.

"Don't mention it." He answered as he returned to his work.

"Try stressing the first syllable and loosening your grip on your wand," Harry suggested, after watching Ernie cast his spell. Ernie was able to conjure stone shields after following Harry's advice.

The lesson ended soon after and they were given homework on the lesson. Harry and Hermione were excused from it due to their brilliant conjuration skills. However, they were asked to hand in an essay on a fifth year spell.

"I think it's brilliant to hear that someone from another house supports what we've done, Harry." Hermione commented as the four students fell in step.

"To think it was Macmillan," Susan added glumly as she looked at her timetable. She brightened up when she realised it was time for lunch.

"Bad blood between the two of you?" Neville asked in surprise.

"No, I just don't care for him much." Susan answered as she walked slightly faster. Hermione smiled in amusement at her response.

"Isn't he rather popular with the girls in Hufflepuff? Naturally, he's probably not as popular as Diggory." Hermione commented as she nudged the Hufflepuff gently.

"Come on, you're talking about Cedric Diggory. He's the epitome of hotness itself, especially when he's wearing a Quidditch uniform." Susan said animatedly as she explored the topic of hot-looking boys on broomsticks with Hermione. Hermione enthusiastically shared her opinions with Susan, much to Harry's amusement.

"I never thought I'd see the day when Hermione animatedly talks about boys instead of some obsolete concept she has discovered in books" Harry said to Neville as they wisely lagged behind the two girls.

"Oh, I believe it's because she's been spending too much time with Susan and Daphne. Anyway, I think it's healthy for us to talk about the opposite sex occasionally." Neville observed. "I think the trial should be coming to a close soon. Are you worried about it?"

"No, I have confidence that Uncle Os and Aunt Am have it covered. The Wizengamot will have no choice but to grant him his freedom." Harry answered.

The hearing was very taxing and long.

With the presentation of Peter Pettigrew in front of the Wizengamot, everyone began to doubt if Sirius was really guilty of the charges that he was serving his sentence for. With each careful presentation of evidence in favour of his innocence like his faithful wand that was seized immediately at the scene and the deliberate emphasis that conclusive evidence in favour of Black's innocence was destroyed over time due to a lack of trial, it was becoming clear that a grave injustice had been done. Sirius Black had suffered for nothing. The council also did not take it well that the injustice was a result of the

negligence of the office that swore to uphold justice in the Wizarding World.

Peter Pettigrew was administered Veritaserum and the truth of the entire betrayal of the Potters was finally exposed.

He had been working undercover for the Dark Lord for more than a year before the Potters' demise and was giving the Death Eaters vital information about the operations of the Order of Phoenix. The Dark Lord grew anxious about getting rid of the Potters after a Death Eater in his inner circle told him about the Prophecy. He had no idea what prophecy said other than the fact that it involved the downfall of the Dark Lord. The Potters were already in hiding then since they had crossed paths with the Dark Lord far too many times. When the Potters had changed their secret keeper from Sirius Black to him, he went to the Dark Lord with the information the very next day.

He had no idea that this critical information would lead to the downfall of his master. He tried to run away since his cover was blown, but Sirius confronted him on the street. To survive, he cut off his own finger, blasted the entire street full of muggles, and transformed into a rat. He scurried into the nearby drains for safety. He told them that he eventually became a pet of the Weasley family so that he could keep tabs on what was going on.

The hearing was immediately adjourned so that the council could digest the vast amount of information presented and come to a decision.

Sirius Black's palms were cold and sweaty as he waited anxiously for the verdict. His long black hair was fashioned into a neat pony tail. Dressed in a simple black dress robes, he looked quite good, especially since under Harry's instructions, he had been well taken care of at Potter Mansion. For once, he had a good night rest. He anxiously crossed his long legs again. Finally, the panel made their decision and the aged wizard in bright purple robes stood up. It was no surprise that the Head of Wizengamot, Albus Dumbledore would preside over this important hearing.

“With overwhelming evidence supporting your innocence, the committee has come into an agreement that Sirius Orion Black, Scion of the Ancient and Noble House of the Black is not guilty of all the charges. He is to be reinstated as Lord Black and will have all his possessions and properties returned to him immediately. Mr. Pettigrew will serve a life sentence in Azkaban without parole in view of his offenses.”

Sirius pumped his hand into the air. He was free! He knew he had to be satisfied that Pettigrew was allowed to live. Pettigrew was immediately escorted out of the hall in unbreakable chains.

“I know many have questioned why Lord Black wasn’t given a trial in the first place. Therefore I, Albus Dumbledore, will take responsibility for the miscarriage of justice in this situation. I hereby resign from the position of Head of Wizengamot effective today. Thank you for the support that you’ve given me over the years.” He announced sombrely, much to the surprise of the entire Wizengamot. Albus Dumbledore stepped out of his box and bowed deeply before exiting the hall.

With no one at the helm, everyone frantically discussed who would be their new leader. All agreed that Wizengamot should be headed by the Patriarch or Matriarch of one of the four Ancient Houses. Traditionally, the position was taken by Lord Potter. However, seeing that Lord Potter had other commitments, they called for one of the other heads to take the position provisionally. Lord Greengrass declined immediately since his businesses took up all the time. Lady Bones was out of the question since she was already the head of Department of Magical Law Enforcement. The burden naturally fell on Sirius’s shoulders.

The chains had been just been removed from Sirius for short while before he was slapped with new chains. This time, they were the responsibilities of being a Lord of an Ancient House and the Interim Head of the Wizengamot.

Lord Oswald and Lady Amelia silently crackled in laughter at the appointment. Sirius reluctantly agreed because of the use of the word ‘interim’ and the promise that he could step down when Harry was

capable enough to head it. Naturally, Oswald's threat also encouraged him to take the position. He casually told Sirius that he'd have to turn over the management of all the Black's businesses back to him if Sirius chose not to accept the appointment. Lord Oswald would no longer have time to care about the Black businesses if he had to be the Head of Wizengamot.

After weighting the pros and cons, Sirius took the position. Nevertheless, Sirius was pleased that he was no longer on the run. He happily walked out of the hall to enjoy the fresh air of freedom. The trial raised a pressing issue in regards to the Potter's betrayal, but Sirius cast that particular thought to the back of his mind as he went out to the streets to enjoy himself.

The Headmaster apparated back to his office. "Your great grandson is free of all charges. He's now heading the family." He said to the portrait of ex-Headmaster Phineas Nigellus Black.

He cracked one of his eyes open to look at his successor. "You mean Sirius? The oddball that was sorted into Gryffindor House? I always thought he was different from the rest. He couldn't have been a Death Eater like Regulus. My guess is that he'll be in for a hard time because I don't think Orion had the foresight to training both of his sons in the ways of managing businesses and running a household."

"Well, he has Greengrass and Bones to show him the way." He answered as he stroked his long white beard. With one obligation gone, he could focus more attention on far more important matters back at school. He threw some green powder into the fireplace. "Severus, I need you." He called. Pettigrew's confession was on his mind when he quietly dismissed the portrait. Headmaster Black's portrait went back to sleep.

"Harry! You have to read this!" Daphne called out excitedly as she dashed through the crowds in the Great Hall to their usual table. "Sirius is free. He's acquitted of all charges and made Lord Black." She handed him the letter.

“That’s fantastic. He’s also made Head of Wizengamot? Does this means that Dumbledore stepped down?” Hermione asked as she looked at Harry.

“Apparently, he took the blame and tendered his resignation on the spot.” Harry answered as he quickly scanned the letter.

“I wonder why.” Hermione pondered as she placed a thumb on the page she was reading so that it would not be lost.

“There isn’t really much to it. It was all rather boring, according to my father.” Daphne added nonchalantly. “To be honest, I wouldn’t give the matter any consideration at all.”

“I mean, don’t you find that it’s strange move coming from a man who loves manipulating?” Hermione continued.

“It was a brilliant move to save his reputation. It’ll stop the committee from looking too hard at the cause of the injustice since Dumbledore has stepped down. Besides, he probably has another plan he wants to focus all his energies on.” Harry suggested.

“That’s true. It’s a smart move because he still has other important titles to fall back on.” Neville added.

“Uncle Os wants to meet with all of us on Saturday. I’m rather busy that day. Could we meet on Sunday instead?” Harry asked as he finished reading the letter.

“Busy with Quidditch?” Daphne teased. “Well, I think that would encourage them to come here to meet us instead. I’m sure they’d love to watch you play. You don’t even have to worry if they can get permission to enter – they’re both on the Board so they can come and go as they please.”

“The match is against Hufflepuff, yeah?” Neville asked.

Harry nodded. “I’ve got practices every evening leading to the match. I think Wood’s desperate to win that Quidditch Cup.”

“With Diggory as our captain, I don’t think Gryffindor has a chance. I think the Quidditch Cup will finally have Hufflepuff’s name on it this year.” Susan added dreamily.

“I got the impression the only advantage he has is his good looks. Since Harry is neither attracted to guys nor is he a girl, I don’t think Cedric will have the advantage as a seeker.” Daphne added indifferently.

“He’s most certainly not just a looker, Daphne. I heard he’s a very effective Captain and the team is in top shape. Hufflepuff will win this year because of him.” Susan protested loudly.

Hermione ignored the rest of them and continue reading.

Harry chuckled at the defensive tone that Susan had used. It reminded him of Hermione’s crush on Lockhart last year. Hermione lifted her head from her book and stared at him with narrowed eyes when she heard his thought.

I most certainly didn’t blindly worship him that way. She protested.

You’re right, love. You were worse. Harry answered honestly.

The occupants at the table were shocked when out of the blue, Hermione slapped Harry hard on his arm and he burst out laughing at her annoyance.

“Did we miss something?” Susan questioned with arched brows.

“No, not at all,” Harry answered as he kept his face straight. With a frown marring her face, Hermione went back to her reading. When the rest of their friends became engrossed with their conversation, he decided to placate her with another truth. Will it help if I tell you I used to wish that I was him last year?

Hermione watched him with curious eyes.

I don't mind being the one who can bring that twinkle to your eyes or cause you to smile dreamily at the mention of my name. He continued.

Oh Harry, you're being incredibly daft. Hermione replied in thought as she laughed dazzlingly and turned away from his gaze. Harry fondly took her hand into his and gently rubbed her hand with the pad of his thumb. The gesture got Hermione's undivided attention.

Well, at least I was smart enough to marry the brightest witch of this century. Harry replied as a brilliant smile fitted his lips. Hermione's heart skipped a beat. Aloud, Harry asked, "I think we've got some time before our next lesson, want to head up to the tower instead? It's getting crowded down here."

She blinked in confusion at the sudden change of the topic.

"I really want to finish this book by today, Harry," Hermione replied as she looked at her novel. "I'm at the most interesting part."

"You can read better without the noise."

"Yes, I would, but you know I'd be distracted by you." Hermione stated and she returned her attentions.

"We'll distract Harry for you," Daphne interrupted. "I believe everyone would love to continue their conversation in a more comfortable setting." The rest of the group agreed heartily.

"Besides, we're attracting too much attention down here." Susan explained as she absently gestured around the dining hall. True enough, several eyes in the hall were fixed on them. "Even though we're treated like royalty around here, all this attention is driving me crazy."

"Welcome to the club," Harry replied with a rakish smirk on his face. "It's stated in the fine prints when you willingly signed on to become friends with me."

"Isn't it a bit too late to mention that now?" Susan demanded.

“Not at all,” Daphne answered in her usual emotionless tone. “When dealing in business, if you don’t read the contract carefully before putting your name, it’s your negligence.”

They chose the Gryffindor common room for the most obvious reason - most of them were Gryffindors. The common room was deserted since most of their fellow housemates decided to make use of the good weather and spend their time out in the sun. Harry and his friends took up most of the large armchairs near the fire.

Neville, Susan, Luna, and Daphne were engrossed in a conversation. Harry joined initially, however the comfort of his position lulled him to sleep after a while. He was reposing on the large couch with his head on Hermione’s lap as she read her novel. Hermione was stroking his head rhythmically, the same way she would do to Crookshanks whenever he climbed onto her lap while she was reading.

Crookshanks hissed slightly when he entered the Gryffindor tower and spotted that his favourite position had been taken. “Someone is furious that he’s being outranked.” Daphne said quietly when she saw the large ginger-coloured cat. Hermione lifted her head from her book. She whipped out her wand carefully so that she would not wake Harry up and summoned some treats for Crookshanks.

It placated Crookshanks immediately. With two treats in his mouth, he hid at the corner and ate them happily. “Well, that solves the problem. I will remind Harry to offer him some treats later.” She declared as she returned her attention to her book.

“You’ll spoil your pet, Hermione.” Susan chided gently as she smiled.

“You should always spoil your pets,” said Daphne. She was not surprised when Crookshanks started to rub himself affectionately around her legs after she said that. “See, Crookshanks agrees with me.” She answered as she picked up the cat and affectionately stroked him. He began purring in contentment. If anyone saw her in this state, it would’ve shattered her reputation as an Ice Queen.

"Daphne, don't you have a cat too?" Neville asked, entranced by the beauty of her smile.

"Yes, I do. Her name is Katrina. I'm certain she's out prowling in Hogwarts ground. Have you ever seen her, Crookshanks? She has sparkling green eyes and long bluish grey fur." She asked as she lifted him gently.

Crookshanks gave her an enquiring mew as he stared at her with his eyes.

"I think he's beautiful." Daphne cooed as she looked at the cat intently. "He's obviously very intelligent. You just got him recently, right?"

Hermione smiled warmly. "Yes, I found him in a pet shop. Nobody else wanted him."

"I'm not surprised. It takes the right person to discover the jewel in him. Kat was a gift from my father. I've had her since I was young."

"Is she your familiar?" Hermione questioned.

"Yes. She became my familiar just recently." Daphne answered as she set Crookshanks on her lap and continued with her fond ministrations.

Crookshanks looked at Hermione inquisitively. "Yes, that means that Daphne can hear and feel her pet's thoughts and emotions. The same way Harry and I can feel and hear yours and Hedwig's emotions and thoughts. Do you want to meet her?" Hermione asked. Crookshanks made no indication but Hermione proceeded to tell Daphne to ask Katrina up.

Moments later, there were loud sounds of fluttering of wings. Two snowy owls carried a greyish blue long-haired cat through the large window into the room. It was Hedwig and Callan. They decided to tag along to see their master and mistress. Crookshanks leapt off Daphne's lap gracefully and approached the cat.

Nobody would doubt that this was Daphne's pet. She had the same disposition as her owner - haughty, elegant, yet uncommonly beautiful. Her sleek greyish-blue coat gleamed in the sun. She searched the room with her almond-shaped sparkling green eyes.

The two snowy owls perched next to each other on the stand quietly and watched to see how the cats would make their first interaction.

Crookshanks approached Katrina cautiously as he observed her. Katrina watched with equal interest, but there was an air of arrogance about the way she held herself.

After a fleeting moment, Crookshanks, to their surprise, turned his back on her and trotted away from her. I don't talk to two types of cats - those who look down on others or look as if they spend most of their time grooming themselves. It's obvious she's another porcelain vase - pretty to look at, but doesn't have any practical use. Crookshanks said to his owner as he moved to the side.

Now, that was rather rude and uncalled for, mister. I'm most certainly not a porcelain vase. Katrina hissed furiously.

Crookshanks spun around to look at her. Oh? Is that best retort you can come up with?

You're being overly judgemental. Must I look unpresentable to show that I do more than just groom myself? Hedwig is a pretty owl and she most certainly useful. She retorted in a haughty voice. It was clear that she hadn't met a male cat who looked down at her the first time they met.

Hedwig's in a different class altogether. Besides, she's an owl. Owls are always useful. They deliver post, remember? He answered. What do you do? Catch rats for your mistress?

I do what all pets ought to do. I'm a source of comfort for my mistress.

So you play with balls of yard occasionally to entertain your mistress? He demanded.

Now you're going overboard. Pardon my forthrightness; it seems that your disdain for beautiful looking feline stems from your low self esteem. You detest beautiful cats because you're jealous. She concluded in a proud tone.

Conceited porcelain vase, he spat as he trotted upstairs.

Jealous bigot. She retorted as she lifted her head and walked out of the Gryffindor common room. The two owls hooted in laughter at the exchange of words between the two felines.

Hermione and Daphne exchanged glances. "I must say that went very well indeed." Hermione said with raised brows.

"I've never seen her throwing a hissy fit. He's hit her sore spot." Daphne answered.

"Crookshanks is never this blunt. He's habitually civil towards females." Hermione responded in bafflement. "I have never seen him behave this way with other female cats. She's hit his sore spot too."

"Are you suggesting that pets have personalities?" Susan interrupted suddenly. The two owners looked at her with astounded expression on their faces.

"Of course they do." Luna added dreamily. "Not all Gremles are the same. Some of them are friendly enough to talk you. Some of them disappear if you try to approach them."

"So your cats quarrelled?" Neville asked in bewilderment.

"Yes, they did. Crookshanks called her an egotistical porcelain vase and she called him a jealous bigot."

"I wonder where they learned those words." Susan quipped thoughtfully. She was curious because she was certain that Hermione or Harry didn't talk that way.

"From books of course - Kat reads in her spare time. Crookshanks does too, right?" Daphne questioned. Harry had told her that the pets

loved reading on the first time they met. That was the reason why they wanted to match-make the two cats together. However, it seemed as if their plan was not going to work.

“Oh yes, Hedwig and Crookshanks love reading.” Hermione affirmed as she turned her head slightly to look at Hedwig meaningfully. Hedwig was sitting on her shoulder reading the page she was at. When she had finished reading the pages, she looked at Hermione intently, as if hoping for her to turn the page. “You can read this later if you want, Hedwig. I’m going to finish the book soon.” Hedwig gave a hoot of annoyance and Hermione flipped to the next page. The owl was immediately engrossed in the book.

The jaws of Neville and Susan had dropped at the sight of an owl reading. Daphne merely shrugged as if it was a common occurrence.

“So does Callan. For that reason alone, they’re a very well-suited pair.” Daphne added as she stroked her large snowy owl. Hedwig and Callan hooted in agreement. Callan took off to check on Katrina after affectionately nipping his owner’s finger when he realised that Hedwig would be busy reading.

“Why is it that I’ve got such an uninteresting pet? I’ve never seen Trevor do anything besides sleep and eat.” He grumbled to himself, much to the amusement of his companions.

The Gryffindors and the Slytherins had Transfiguration after their long break. True to Professor McGonagall’s word, she was teaching them how to transfigure masonry. Like their Charms Professor, she asked Harry to do a demonstration so that she could award him house points. She went through the wand motion and the spell words before allowing the class to try their hands in transfiguring the rock into statues of their partner. To everyone’s surprise, Neville managed to get his transfiguration done at first try, he had transfigured it into a statue of Harry on a broomstick.

“Well done, Mr. Longbottom.” Professor McGonagall said proudly. “Ten points to Gryffindor for that excellent work.” His cheeks had reddened slightly as Neville muttered a sheepish ‘thank-you’. Harry good-naturedly clapped him on his back and cheekily transfigured his

rock to imitate Neville. The same embarrassed smile was on the sculpture's face.

He decided that it was no fun, since he did not get a reaction from Neville. He decided to transfigure his statue so that it became his wife's likeness. A wide beam split his face when he beheld his final masterpiece; it was of Hermione in the stunning, simple pink dress she wore to the ball. Her wavy hair was pulled up into a chignon, highlighting the extravagant choker with sparkling rubies. His attention to details made it no different from the person he had decided to model his statue.

"Is this how I really looked that night?" Hermione asked in awe as she looked at the sculpture. The rest of the class had stopped casting their spell to take a look at his work.

"Yes, when I first spotted you in the crowd." Harry replied honestly.

"You've got a good eye for details," Daphne commented. The statue of Hermione she created was not as life-like as his.

"You're horse-whipped, Potter." Malfoy remarked from the side.

Much to Hermione's delight, Harry shrugged indifferently at his remark. "I don't deny that I am. After all, she's brilliant." He answered.

A/N: Hi, thank you for your reviews. Do you think the Weasleys are being let off too lightly? I'd the impression that the best way to piss people who pick on you is to ignore them and make them realise that they are not even worth your time. What do you think about this approach? Next up, Quidditch match. Please do share your views on this chapter. Have a great week ahead!

Chapter 16

Beta read by frustr8dwriter

Hermione never really liked Quidditch, but she'd always tolerated it since her best friends, including her husband, were crazy about it. However, she absolutely hated the upcoming Quidditch match. There were three main reasons why she hated it.

First, she couldn't go anywhere without hearing people talking excitedly about it. In fact, practically all of Hogwarts had been talking about it ever since they got over the Wizard's Duel. It was not only the guys that were so revved up about the match - the girls were equally as ecstatic. Hermione was initially fascinated by the excitement, but soon grew tired of it. Eventually, she grew annoyed with it.

Her dark brows furrowed in irritation as she slammed the thick volume of book in her lap closed. "That's it! I've had enough!" She exclaimed with great irritation. Her eyes narrowed into slits as she glared at the offending group of thrilled Gryffindors discussing Quidditch. The students hurriedly scrambled onto their feet. After mumbling something that sounded quite close to an apology, they darted out of the room. The common room emptied as soon as everyone realised that Hermione was not in a good mood.

With another day until the highly anticipated match was played, Hermione had heard enough about the subject. "I can't imagine why everyone is so excited. That's all they've been talking about it for days! Don't they care about anything else?" She hissed as she stood up.

Her companions looked at her in surprise.

"You really can't tell why, Hermione? This match will determine the winner of the Quidditch Cup this year. Besides, the two hottest guys at Hogwarts will be flaunting their skills and their muscles on the pitch." Susan explained.

Hermione realised several days ago that Harry Potter had made it into the list of most desirable hunks in the school when she overheard a conversation between two girls. She knew that there was a list but ever since she had moved into the married quarters with Harry, she had no chance to access to such information. Daphne and Susan informed her that he just made into the list when he returned back to Hogwarts looking so filled out. She knew that Cedric Diggory was on the list last year. It explained a great deal on the female's interest in the match.

"I still don't understand. How can one Quidditch match be more important than your tests? Our exams are coming up and I can't find a suitable place to study. This match is all anyone can talk about." She answered crabbily.

That was the second reason why she hated the upcoming match. She couldn't even seek refuge in the library to do some studying. Madame Pince desperately tried to hush the students in the library. However, since everyone was talking at the same time and she was helpless in maintaining the room's sacred silence.

Daphne's trimmed blonde eyebrows rose into her hairline at that statement. "You shouldn't be so surprised, Hermione. After all, you're the only one who gets to see Harry unclothed. The rest of the female population has to be satisfied with the sight of him without his thick robe." She teased. A smile of amusement appeared on Daphne's lips when she heard Hermione's earlier outburst.

Hermione ignored the Slytherin's comment as she stared out of the window. The sky was dark and it was raining cats and dogs. It was the reason why they had decided to retreat to the Gryffindor common room instead of spending time outside.

"Everything will be over tomorrow, Hermione. You'll get to see Harry as often as you wish." Luna said as she placed her arm around the gloomy brown-haired witch's shoulders.

This was the last reason why she hated the upcoming match. Oliver Wood had commandeered all the free time Harry had for Quidditch practices over the past few days. The team had gruelling practices in

the morning and in the evening over the last week. Harry had to wake up early in the morning to finish his homework before heading out to his morning practices. He would only appear at the dining hall for a quick breakfast before he had to rush to lessons. During lunch, he was expected to sit with the Gryffindor team to discuss the tactics they would use in the upcoming competition. With every free minute he had, he was expected to be practising Quidditch at the pitch. Naturally, they had practices after their lessons ended. Hermione would only see Harry when he entered their room after curfew. By then, Harry was so exhausted that he would collapse into bed after a brief shower. Hermione tried to accompany him on his practices but Harry had persuaded her against it. She could not afford to waste the time since she had to tutor the rest of her friends and help him with his duties.

After the Wizard's duel, the Gryffindors were more accepting of Harry, Hermione, and their group of friends, and were much friendlier. They began to dislike Ron and Percy Weasley for their despicable methods. In fact, the Weasley twins had taken justice into their own hands, together with the rest of the House, pranking Ron whenever they could. Professor McGonagall did not comment about their treatment since Ron was now considered a disgrace to the house.

"Look on the bright side; we're all sitting in this comfy common room enjoying the warmth of the fire instead of braving the storm outside," commented Neville chirpily as he looked up from his book on Herbology.

The pitter-pattering of rain falling on the window filled the room when everyone grew silent.

"Harry's out there as we speak." Hermione said, breaking the stillness as she looked at Neville. Hermione sighed as she placed her book on the side table. Hermione was certain that the information did not register with Neville because he was once again engrossed in his Herbology book. She rolled her head slightly to relieve the tension she felt there.

Well, after Sirius had been freed, there were no more pressing issues to keep her mind off his constant absence.

“Well, it will be over soon. You’ll get to see Harry on the pitch tomorrow,” assured Susan with a smile. “While we wait for dinner to be ready, could you please review my Potions homework and tell me what I’ve missed? Professor Snape has really been picking on me lately. I don’t want to give him a reason to lash out at me.” Susan asked as she took out her rolled out scroll.

Hermione shrugged, “Sure – I’d be happy to take a look at it. I think Snape’s on your case because you’re close friends with Harry.” She unrolled the parchment and began to review Susan’s work.

The portrait of the common room swung open suddenly, distracting Hermione. It revealed a group of tired students in Gryffindor team uniforms looking like a group of drowned rats. The team of guys and girls quietly split up and went to their respective dorms. Harry was the last to enter, looking as soaked as the rest of his team when he made his appearance. Hermione bolted from the couch into his arms. Harry laughed gaily as his arms tightened around her.

“Hi, sweetheart.” Harry whispered as he gently brushed the hair that were covering her face with his hand. “You do know that I’m a bit wet, right?” He questioned.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m a witch, remember?” She laughed as she whipped out her wand and cast a drying spell on both of them. He laughed brightly.

“Thank you. How could I forget?” Turning to the other occupants in the room, he spoke, “Hi, guys. Studying?” He asked as he glanced at the books spread on the table.

Luna glanced up from her magazine. “It’s strange to see you before dinner, Harry.”

“Everyone reckoned that it was better for us to have a good rest tonight. Oliver was ignored when he suggested extending practice. Everyone’s really sore and wet.” Harry answered jovially as he gathered Hermione into his arms. “I’m surprised to see the place so empty.” He commented as he looked around.

"That's courtesy of Hermione." Daphne interrupted as she gestured around the vacant room. He arched his brow as he looked at the girl in his arms.

"Well, I'd had enough of the Quidditch talk." Hermione replied as she averted her eyes from his probing gaze.

Harry burst into laughter. "I bet the bit about you being brilliant and scary was reaffirmed today." He grinned rakishly. Hermione swatted him on the arm. "I mean it isn't your fault. For some strange reason, everyone has been talking about it. You can imagine my surprise when I overheard Lavender talking about it." He continued and shrugged.

"Well, I'm not as surprised as you are, Harry." Daphne answered as she shook her head. "I think you're polluting the air with your presence. She might have dried you, but you still stink." She wrinkled her nose.

"I'll head up for a shower." He answered. Without another word, he pulled Hermione for a long drugging kiss before jogging up for a shower, whistling as he went.

Affected by his abnormally good mood, Hermione found herself smiling as she watched him retreat upstairs. The menacing mood dissipated immediately, much to the hilarity of the rest of the girls.

"So you needed me to check your work, Susan?" She asked patiently as she folded her arms in faux- annoyance. Susan nodded calmly after regaining some composure and brushing the dust off of her clothes. She had laughed so hard that she fell off the crouch, clutching her stomach which evoked another bout of laughter from the group. Hermione shook her head at the sight.

"You must have been your etiquette teacher's nightmare." She teased as she sat next to Susan and continued to read her work. There was an amused smile tugging her lips as she focused on the potion essay.

Harry and the Weasley twins joined them after they had showered and changed into their school uniforms. Once again, Hermione noted that Harry's tie was crooked.

"What kind of Lord doesn't know how to put his tie on properly?" She asked with mild annoyance as she began to adjust his tie. Harry stood still as he allowed his wife to deal with it.

"A lord who has an attentive and capable wife." Harry whispered into her ear when Hermione was done with the task. He offered his arm to her and she took it. "I don't know about you, but I'm famished. Let's talk in the dining hall." He said as he turned to his friends. Hermione shook her head in amusement when she realised that they had been sniggering.

Dinner was a joyful affair as Harry and the Weasley twins were updated about the events that took place in their absence. The group had started to run with Hermione every morning before Neville and Luna's Occlumency lessons. It had all began when Luna went Gremle-hunting the morning after the Dementors were recalled. Neville agreed to go with her on that trip since he'd wanted to wake up earlier to practice Occlumency. It was then that he realised that Hermione had a habit of jogging around Black Lake in the crack of dawn. He told the rest about it and they expressed similar interest in joining her so that they could keep fit. Neville and Luna would have their Occlumency lessons with Hermione, Susan, and Daphne after their run. The Weasley twins thought that it was a wonderful idea and had also decided to join them for their daily run after their match.

"I heard that Mr. Weasley asked all of you to come home that day. What happened?" Susan asked curiously as she looked at the twins. The Weasley twins sobered immediately.

"For once, dad wasn't angry with us." One of the Weasley twins spoke. "We've never seen him in such a temper. Mum was livid with fear- "

"-she was not the only one. I mean he was very scary-" The other interjected as both of them shuddered involuntarily at their recollection.

“-should have seen the expression on his face. He managed to get the whole thing out from Ron and Ginny. He was absolutely incensed when he realised that you’ve saved Ron and Ron repaid that by plotting to hurt and betray you. At least he felt ashamed for his actions after Dad set him right-“

Harry exchanged looks with Hermione. They were certain that he would forget after a while.

“-Ginny, on the hand, was difficult. She show no signs of remorse when she told Dad about the entire year. She shared with us how she constantly planned to take Hermione out of the equation and prepared herself by reading up on offensive spells. It was clear to us that Ginny was not right in the head. He decided to temporarily withdraw her from school so that she can seek treatment at St. Mungo. It’s really what’s best for her.” The twins shook their head sadly.

“As for Mum, he has chased her out of the Burrow. He told her that their actions were the product of her greed and malice. She had failed him as a wife and their mother.” The Weasley twins answered. “Mum screamed at him, saying that she had been slogging in this household for many years without any benefit and she left.”

Everyone at the table grew contemplative. “Anyway, Hermione and Harry, thank you for letting Ginny off.” One of the Weasley twins said.

“In a way, it wasn’t really her fault.” Hermione answered. “I’m glad that she is getting the treatment from St Mungo’s that she really needs.” She smiled.

“I really hope it will help. She’ll never live a normal life otherwise.” The Weasley twins said grimly. It was bizarre to see such a severe expression on their faces. Neville and Luna immediately switched to another topic, talking about Quidditch. Hermione was surprisingly understanding about the change in subject.

The Weasley twins brightened immediately and began sharing about their favourite team as Neville and Luna did their best in appearing to

be interested. Daphne and Susan played their part by sharing too. Soon, their conversation grew lively.

The group retreated back to their respective dormitories after they finished dinner so that they could rest. Harry sat by the window, looking at the starless sky outside. It had been pouring all day and it seemed that it would continue to rain the next day. He could feel butterflies in his stomach at the thought of the match the next day. Harry remembered all of his pre-game nights - he had such a hard time getting any sleep because of his nerves.

Hermione walked into their bedroom, dressed in her nightgown. Her hair was neatly tied into a ponytail as if she was going to do some work. He spotted a small bottle in her hand. He arched his brows questioningly as he looked at his wife.

"I know you usually can't sleep before a game, so I've thought of something to help you relax." She answered as she gestured him to the bed. He climbed into the bed and lay on his stomach, with his head on the pillow.

There was a faint smell of Ylang-Ylang when she unscrewed the bottle cap.

"Relax," she cooed. He felt her weight on the bed, then her hands on his muscles. He nearly moaned in delight from the way she knead his muscles.

"That feels really good." Harry muttered appreciatively as he closed his eyes to enjoy the massage. Her hands were doing a fine work kneading the tension out from his muscles. He soon found himself drifting through layers of sleep.

"Good morning everyone," Harry greeted chirpily as he helped to draw a chair for his wife before sitting next to his team. Hermione and Harry were uncharacteristically late. Luna gave Hermione a meaningful smile as she looked up and greeted her friends.

"You looked unusually alert today." Neville commented as he gestured to the rest of the Gryffindor team sitting nearby. The living

zombies had dark circles around their eyes as they muttered a tired greeting. They were restlessly playing with their food instead of eating them.

Harry never noticed the team before their game and was shocked to see how tired they were.

“You usually look like that before a game,” Hermione commented as she tucked into the food. Harry grinned blissfully.

“Haven’t I thanked you enough this morning for last night?” He whispered huskily as he leaned towards her.

“I’m not sure that it was quite enough to make up for the last few days.” She answered boldly before she engaged in a small conversation with Luna. Since Harry was busy thanking her that morning, Hermione had missed their morning run and their Occlumency lesson. He heartily helped himself to some breakfast. Daphne and Susan soon joined them. Susan eyed Hermione with great interest after noticing Harry’s unusually perkiness.

After a while, Wood interrupted their conversation.

“It’s time.” Oliver said in a gruffly voice. Harry started feeling his nerves when he realised it was time to head to the changing room. The rest of the team had already followed him out. Harry wiped his mouth with a napkin before standing up.

His stomach was in knots.

There was a gleam in Hermione’s eyes when he looked at her. Without a warning, she clutched the front of his robes and pulled him down for a long kiss that left him in daze.

“Good luck.” Hermione whispered as she pecked him on the cheeks and turned him loose. Harry nodded, with a goofy grin on his face before dashing after his team.

Nerves have now become the least of my problems, Harry thought.

Dressed in his scarlet robes and Quidditch armour, Harry did some final maintenance on his undefeatable Nimbus 2000 as he waited for his team to get ready. It was already in perfect condition but Harry wanted to do something with his hands to relieve some of the tension of the moment. If the expressions of his teammates were a clear indication, they were all anxious about the match. The team automatically sat at the benches as they waited for Wood's usual pre-game talk.

The burly captain looked at all his teammates carefully.

"I know that you're worried and your worries are not unfounded. This is the first time we're pitted against this newly reformed Hufflepuff team." He began softly. "However, I believe that because of all the hard work and effort of every single member of this team, we will emerge victorious." Wood smiled.

"Look, I know that for the past two years, the Quidditch Cup should've had our names on it because we've got the best beaters on the team, superb chasers who make scoring look easy, and a seeker who never fails to lead us to victory." He continued, giving an appreciative smile to each player as they were mentioned. "You're the best team Gryffindor has ever had." He went on. His teammates had smiles on their faces. "It doesn't matter that we didn't win the cup the past two years. What matters most is now. What matters most is you get out there and have fun. What matters most is that we'll give them a game they will never forget. Can we do it?" Oliver roared.

"Yes!" The team shouted in cohesion.

"Right, let's get out there and play a good game!" Oliver concluded proudly as he took his broom and marched out of the changing room. The rest of the team with renewed confidence took their brooms and followed their leader into the pitch.

The sky was downcast and it was drizzling slightly. That did not hinder the turnout for the match. The stands surrounding the large pitch were filled with students carrying umbrellas.

As the team trudged out onto the muddy pitch, the crowd burst into a loud applause. Lee Jordan was again the commentator for the game and he proudly announced every member of the team. Harry noticed there was an even number of students wearing red and yellow. Someone had created a large majestic lion that roared when they had made their appearance.

He could not help but feel nervous the moment they stood in place, awaiting the start of the match. Madame Hooch, holding an umbrella, was refereeing the match.

“Captains, shake hands!” Madam Hooch said. The tall and dashing boy in Canary yellow robes strode forward. Harry immediately recognised him - it was Cedric Diggory.

Diggory had a warm smile on his face as he walked forward to shake Wood’s hand. They grasped each other hands before turning away to join their team.

“Mount your brooms!” She announced as she placed the whistle near her mouth. “Three...two...one!”

The sound of the whistle was lost in the roar of the crowd as fourteen brooms rose into the air. His nerves left him in the thrill of the flight. As he bolted into the air, he noticed that Diggory had sped away in search of the snitch. Judging from experience, he knew that the snitch would not appear so soon. He climbed higher so that he would have a bird-eye view of the game as he searched for the allusive tiny ball.

Harry’s heart burst with pride at the flawless way his team played the game. He spotted the two Scarlet robes in the midst of Canary yellow robes. He recognised it as the new formation that they had been practising. Spinnet and Johnson adroitly weaved into the Hufflepuff defence, passing the Quaffle to and fro rapidly, rendering their plan of action useless. Soon, Spinnet made the first shot at the three large goal posts.

He held his breath as he watched the goal keeper dive in his attempt to block that shot. He merely missed by an inch.

“SPINET SCORES! TEN TO ZERO TO GRYFFINDOR!” Lee Jordan shouted. “A MOST SPECTACULAR PLAY BY THE GRYFFINDORS!”

Harry pumped his arm into the air at the brilliant teamwork. “Go Gryffindor!” He shouted as he clapped. The game rapidly went back to play.

This time the Hufflepuffs thought of an effective counter-measure. The Hufflepuff beaters countered the Gryffindor’s passes with a well-timed bludger. Spinnet lost possession of the Quaffle when the bludger knocked it out of her hands. One of the Hufflepuff chasers hurriedly caught the falling Quaffle. George immediately dived in to aim the bludger towards his twin who was below that Hufflepuff chaser. The chaser nimbly dodged the bludger by leaning on his broom but he was nearly knocked out of his broom when Fred beat it right back at him. The Quaffle was knocked out of his hands into the hands of the speeding Johnson. She took the opening to make another shot at the goal.

Not expecting the shot, the goal keeper dived fruitless as the Quaffle made its graceful decent through the undefended hoop.

“AND SHE SCORES! TWENTY TO ZERO TO GRYFFINDOR! THAT WAS UNBELIVABLE! He should have paid attention to the chasers.”

The Hufflepuff chasers tried to fly past the defence of the Gryffindor team and the weaving bludgers. They got through as two teammates protected the chaser with the Quaffle. Near the goal, the chaser swiftly passed the Quaffle to another Hufflepuff chaser bolting like a bullet from the back. It caught the Gryffindor team by surprise. That chaser managed to make a throw at the goal but Wood did a spectacular save - he caught the speeding Quaffle with one hand.

The crowd roared at the marvellous display of skills.

Unaffected, he hurriedly threw the Quaffle to the speeding Bell as the Gryffindor team began their attack on the Hufflepuffs.

Too fascinated with the game, Harry only spotted the Bludger when it was bolting straight at him. He hurriedly rolled over. He could hear the black ball whizzing past his right ear. "Sheesh, I shouldn't have remained here for so long." He said to himself. Time for some distractions, he thought as he pressed his body onto his broom and dived as if he had found the snitch.

"I THINK POTTER HAS SEEN THE SNITCH - BELL SCORES! THIRTY-TO ZERO TO GRYFFINDOR!"

Diggory, thinking that he saw the snitch, followed him into a dive. He narrowly avoided the second bludger that the Hufflepuff beater had sent in his way. Fred took the opportunity to whack the bludger into Diggory.

"OH!" The crowd gasped as the bludger made contact with his jaw and he nearly fell off his broom. Diggory impressively pulled himself back on the broom and flexed his jaw. Satisfied that it was not broken, he pressed himself on the broom and searched for Harry. He halted when he realised it was a hoax. Harry chuckled when he saw the amused expression on Diggory's face. He went back searching for the tiny snitch on his own.

Harry act as a distraction when one of the Hufflepuff tried to hit the bludger to the speeding Johnson as she tried to make her shot at the goal. His ruse worked and Johnson made her goal, pushing the score to forty to zero. "Good job, Harry!" Fred shouted as he whacked the bludger away from Bell to the speeding Hufflepuff Chaser carrying the Quaffle. It knocked the Quaffle from his hands and Spinnet caught the Quaffle below him and threw it towards the goal. It went through, pushing the score to fifty-zero.

Where can that snitch be? He thought as he looked around. It was getting cold since he was getting soaked from the rain. The wind was getting increasingly stronger and Harry realised that he had to grip his broom tightly to prevent it from being blown away.

"I'm so glad I'm heavier now. I'd have been blown off course with such winds." He muttered as he scanned the area carefully. The

Gryffindor team was making a splendid attempt at the goal. There were still no signs of the snitch.

Suddenly he spotted something gold and small lingering near one of the Hufflepuff chasers. "Diggory, the Snitch!"

Harry sped towards the snitch at breakneck speed. "Come on! Come on! Come on!" He shouted as he geared his broom to move faster. Adrenaline began to pump through his veins in a furious pace as he shot through the air. He felt another presence side him. He had no doubt it was Diggory. They were neck to neck for the snitch. The snitch made an abrupt dive towards the ground and the two seekers followed.

Both gave up on knocking each other off the broom as they tried to catch the snitch. Harry flatted himself onto the broom and pulled into a vertical dive. Wind rushed up his face, making it impossible to open his eyes fully. The thrill of diving at such rapid speed made his heart race. He was getting closer to the golden ball with each second.

"Just a little more," he said to himself.

No! He thought when he saw the snitch changed its direction and headed towards Diggory. Diggory grinned, when he realised it was near his grasp. He took one hand off his broom and reached for it. It was inches away from his clutch.

Harry, without hesitation, pulled the broom and immediately released his hands. He knocked Diggory's hand out of the way and snatched the snitch from Diggory's grasp. His broom collided with Diggory's broom with an awful sound. Diggory instantly held onto the broom for support. Harry, on the other hand, was nearly knocked off his broom.

Before he could recover from the collision, there was a loud 'wham'! A bludger knocked into one of his legs from another direction. The impact threw him off the broom completely. Harry felt himself falling through the air in increasing acceleration. He was not sure if he could survive the fall unharmed even if he could break his fall properly. Harry had to try so he did a somersault so that he would land on his back. As he prepared for the inevitable, he felt himself slowing down.

He scrunched his face in confusion and glanced around him. He was certain that the velocity should be increasing as one approach the ground. He felt as if a force was gently lowering him back to the ground.

Relax, darling. Hermione's voice spoke in a gentle tone. Harry calmed down instantly when he realised that Hermione was using her wind power.

Thanks honey. Please don't overwork yourself. I should be able to break the fall without hurting myself at this speed. He responded.

Isn't it uncomfortable to roll in armour? She asked.

A side roll should be alright, Harry chuckled. His hands made first contact with the muddy ground and he rolled across the muddy grass on his side until he lay flat.

There was an odd ringing sound in his ear as he lay still. In the midst of his fall, he forgot about the snitch in his hand. The tiny golden ball was beating its wings uselessly against his tight grasp. He caught the snitch, he thought excitedly. He scrambled onto his feet and lifted the snitch into the air.

The crowd went wild.

"POTTER CAUGHT THE SNITCH! GRYFFINDOR WINS! WHAT A SPECTECULAR GAME!"

There were sounds of people landing on the ground. Soon, he was surrounded by his worried teammates.

The team hurriedly rushed to Harry to check on him. "Are you alright? You fell from quite a height."

"I'm fine." He grinned happily as he stared at the stands, searching for his wife. He had no luck finding her.

"Even after that drop?" They asked incredulously.

"I think I'll probably have a large bruise from that nasty bludger." He answered as he lifted his pants to look at the point the bludger had made an impact. The armour had a large crater.

"Ouch," Katie winced at the sight of the dent in the armour.

"Anyway, good job, Harry. We've won the match!" Wood shouted loudly as he slapped Harry on the back enthusiastically.

"We won!" They shouted gleefully as they embraced him in a large group hug.

Katie and Alicia moved aside when Madam Hooch walked through to inspect the seeker.

"Mr. Potter, I think a visit to the Hospital Wing may be in order." Madam Hooch commented. Hermione appeared next to him in moments as she dashed down from the stands. Harry lifted her in his arms and spun her around gleefully.

She held onto him tightly as if her life depended on it. "I hate it when you do that." She mumbled when he set her down. He fondly tucked some of her hair behind.

"Or maybe not," Madam Hooch said to nobody in particular as she headed indoors.

"Which were you referring? Falling from such a height or spinning you around in my arms wildly in front of my team?" He asked cheekily.

The team who was hanging on his every word chuckled.

Hermione averted her eyes from him.

"I'm fine." He assured with a smile "I think I've got some mild cuts from the fall." Harry replied. "Your birthday present saved me from a lot of pain, sweetheart." He whispered into her hair as he held her close. Hermione lifted her face to look at him. Harry cupped her face

with his two hands, leaned down and tenderly brushed his lips across her lips in a sweet kiss. Thank you, he thought.

The girls on his team made exaggerated swooning sounds when Harry turned away from Hermione. Hermione busied herself with casting a warming and water repelling spell for Harry and a cleaning spell for both of them. Her clothes were stained with the mud from his robes.

"She saved me after all." He defended as he snaked his arm around her waist. The team laughed.

Some of the crowds file into the pitch in threes to congratulate the winning team. "That was a really good game, Harry." A deep voice spoke. He could remember that voice even though it had lost its raspy tone. Harry looked in the direction of the speaker and saw Sirius grinning at him. He looked simply dashing as before in a nicely tailored suit and a necktie with the emblem of the Blacks engraved on it.

"Sirius!" He shouted as he hugged his godfather. "Aunt Am." He greeted when he saw the smiling lady standing beside his godfather.

"Congratulations, your father would be very proud to know that you can fly that well." Sirius beamed as he led him aside. Pride was evident in his face when he looked at him.

"I believe I should be the one congratulating you." Harry smirked. "Congrats on being appointed Head of the Wizengamot."

"No thanks to you." He complained. "I'm an Interim Head. I'm waiting for you to take the position." He continued.

"Well, I think you'll have to wait a few years. I'll be willing to take the post when I've graduated. Besides, you need something to do. Uncle Os tells me he has maintained your family's interests in your absence and will continue to do so until you're ready. You don't really have much to do." Harry pointed out.

“Why you little rascal.” Sirius grinned rakishly as he grabbed Harry and tousled his hair. Harry was red from the small friendly tussle. Aunt Am was chuckling politely at the display of affections.

“I think it’s time to retreat back to the Castle. Oswald is here. We’ll be in Professor Lupin’s office.” Lady Bones said as she looked at the sky meaningfully. It was getting to be more than a light drizzle. “Remember to ask Hermione along.” She concluded.

“See ya later pup.” Sirius answered as he took Amelia’s hand and rushed for the nearest cover.

Harry smiled at the sight of their entwined hands. He was going to get the story of them soon. The team gestured him to join them back at the changing room, which he did.

As Harry was having his shower, he realised that Hermione had disappeared in the middle of his conversation with Sirius. As the warm water beat down his body, cuts were made known to him as he felt the stinging pain. Where could she have gone? His brows furrowed in confusion as he sent a probing thought through their mind link.

I’m out hunting for your broom. The strong wind blew it away from the pitch.

Alone? Why don’t you head in? It looked as if it was going to pour before I went for a shower.

No, not really. I’m with Diggory and Crookshanks.

His face scrunched up in confusion when he heard her thoughts. He did not know that she was acquainted with Diggory. Before he could ask her for the reason, her thought interrupted.

I found the reason why I can’t summon your broom, Harry. I’m heading in for a warm shower. Diggory is a sweet guy.

Oh? He questioned a bit offhandedly and he stopped lathering himself with soap.

I saw Aunt Am and Sirius. Are you meeting them after you've showered?

Yes, in Uncle Moony's office. He answered as he rinsed himself by turning the shower on. What was Diggory doing with Hermione? He wondered.

He tried to retrieve your broom when it was blown away. Hermione explained. That's all there was to it, my love.

Oh? His tone was considerably brighter. Thank him for me, would you?

You can thank him yourself, Harry. He's already returned to the Hufflepuff dorm. I'll see you at Professor Lupin's office.

The rest of the Gryffindor team went back up to the common room to celebrate their victory as Harry headed towards Professor Lupin's office.

Lord Greengrass had removed his formal robe and hung it casually around the arm of his chair. The sleeves of his long shirt were tucked up as he laughed at some shared joke. Lord Black was in a similar state, with his robe hung around a chair. Lady Bones was still in her formal attire. Since it was his office, Lupin was also there. He looked so young when he laughed. Harry knocked on the door.

"Ah, Lord Potter is here." Sirius joked as he gestured him to an empty chair.

"Uncle Os, Uncle Moony." He greeted with a smile as he sat on one of the conjured armchairs. Harry noticed that someone had conjured large comfortable armchairs for the meeting.

"I was so glad that I took the time off to watch. It was a spectacular game. You were amazing out there. You're definitely Jamie's son. Did you show the same aptitude when you were younger, Harry? I mean Jamie was flying skilfully on his broom before he learned to walk."

Uncle Os said cheerfully as he sipped from his goblet. "Would you like a drink?" He asked as he conjured a cup.

"Pumpkin juice please." He answered. Uncle Os handed him a goblet full of pumpkin juice.

"Really?" Sirius and Lupin interjected. "Must've given Auntie a scare." Sirius continued.

"Naturally he did. I think Elder Lord Potter was proud of his son. I can't really remember though. I was still very young." Uncle Os continued.

"From the way you look, I'd have thought that you would be old enough to remember when James was a toddler." Sirius teased.

Uncle Oswald's forehead was creased with a frown.

"Look here, who's responsible for the premature wrinkles on my face? I'm made old by handling all of Black's and Greengrass' business. You could help me to look younger by taking control of your own family business." Oswald continued.

"Empty threats." Sirius retorted silently, but he stopped his teasing immediately.

Harry chuckled at how easily subdued Sirius was. Glancing around the office, he realised that he was not the only one.

"How did you get in?" Harry asked curiously. "I was told that you can only enter Hogwarts with the permission of the Headmaster."

"Well, ordinary people can't enter without his permission. That doesn't apply to us." Sirius answered and barked in laughter. "I realised you don't have to head the board to have free access to the school. You just have to be the Head of an Ancient House."

"I always hated the entire Lord affair but it really does have its privileges." Uncle Os smirked. It piqued Harry's curiosity why he

needed free access to Hogwarts. "By the way, where's Hermione?" He asked as he looked at Harry.

"Hermione?" Sirius echoed. "I was not aware that you've a daughter by that name. I remember the name of your first born - Daphne. Is Hermione your other child?" Sirius questioned.

Before anyone could answer, there was a polite knock on the door.

"Sorry for being so late." Hermione said politely as she entered. Harry immediately stood up and walked to her side.

"I just got here a few minutes ago myself." Harry answered as he wrapped one of his arms around her waist. Surprise was written clearly on Sirius's face.

"Sirius, allow me to introduce you to the most important person in my life." Harry grinned affectionately as he shot a side glance at his wife. "This wonderful lady beside me is Lady Gryffindor or Hermione Potter." Harry said proudly.

His godfather stood up in shock. He was gobsmacked. "Lady Gryffindor?" He repeated incredulously as he took a good look at her.

"Good afternoon, Lord Black. Yes, that's my title." Hermione replied. He scrunched his face in confusion as he looked at the couple for a while.

The dots began to connect and he exclaimed, "You're a soul bonded couple!" He smacked his head hard. "How could I have missed the signs? I was wondering how you claimed your position since you were muggle-raised. It was Hermione who was in danger that night wasn't she?" He asked quietly.

Harry led Hermione to a seat so that they could recount their side of the tale.

"Are you nuts, Harry? You let the Weasleys go?" Sirius demanded as he stood up angrily. "Don't you care about Hermione? I mean she's your wife. I should murder Dumbledore for sending that slimy git to

check on you. He nearly killed all of us! That informer should be disowned for his lack of principles. I'm going to have a word or two with him!" Sirius growled as he tried to storm of the office.

"Don't be reckless, Sirius. You'll just make yourself look bad." Aunt Am chided as she held his arm.

"I love Hermione. If it had been anyone else, I would've done far more than to stun them." Harry argued. "Mr. Weasley has already sent Ginny to St Mungo's and the rest have been punished."

"Punished? How? Broken wands? Detentions? Earlier curfews?" Sirius demanded. "You're a Lord of an Ancient House. If you don't want to flex your muscles to deter others from treating you this way, I most certainly will. There is one thing the Magical society despises and that is betrayal."

Lord Greengrass nodded affirmatively. "I agree with Sirius. We've to set an example from them. Can you imagine the consequences if you let them off completely? They'd all think you have no teeth. Hermione could get harassed by other crazy fan girls as a result. Star! I'm in need of your services." He called.

A house elf soon appeared.

"I need to make an announcement to be made to all businesses that we're in control of or are affiliated to us. I also need to make another announcement to be sent to the Daily Prophet. It must be published on the front page tomorrow. The four Ancient Houses have decided to break all ties with the Weasley family for the grievances done to Lord Potter and Lord Black. They are hereby banned from entering places which we owned or have significant control over. We shall not do businesses with them. Anyone who wishes to continue to be friendly with them will be deemed as setting themselves against us. We will consider retracting this order if they make a public apology, listing every single offense they have dealt to our Heads and their consorts by Monday. Reluctance to do so will result in a full-fledge war between the Ancient Houses and the Weasley family." Lord Oswald dictated.

"You do realise that Dumbledore would fall under this category, don't you?" Lupin asked.

"Naturally, he has been an irritant. He wouldn't dare defy us outright because it would ruin him." Lord Oswald answered.

"Go to war?" Harry questioned.

"Yes." Lord Oswald answered simply. "Because of Voldemort, everyone is terrified of the idea of going to war. If we threatened to do so, everyone would sever their ties with them and add pressure on them to do as we request. I don't really see a need to anyway. All the businesses are either owned or are controlled by one of us. They would starve to death because of the lack of income."

"My two close friends are Weasleys too. It's too much to force them to choose between loyalty to their family or friends." Harry interrupted.

"They'll be in school, won't they? The storm wouldn't affect them. Well, unless his family refuses to do a public apology." Sirius shrugged. "I believe it's not too much to request a formal apology." Sirius continued. He looked at Amelia and realised that he had her support.

"I have to agree with them. Would you rather raise this issue at Wizengamot?" Lady Bones questioned. "Because I'm all for it." She concluded.

The young couple shook their head.

"That settles it then. Thank you, Star. I appreciate your services." Uncle Oswald smiled appreciatively.

"It's my duty, my Lord." The house elf answered. Star hurriedly finished the dictation and disappeared in a flash to finish the tasks assigned.

"I believe I owe you a tale?" Uncle Oswald questioned as he looked at the new couple. "We are required to tell you about us, since both of you are the latest members." Uncle Os smiled as he looked at the

young couple. "I'm sure you've already begun to read about it. But I believe words are not sufficient to portray the picture of how closely knitted our families are."

"Do you need me to leave?" Professor Lupin asked.

"There is no need." Uncle Oswald answered. "You're family. We're going to let everyone know."

"But I'm a werewolf.-" He protested.

"- It doesn't matter, Moony. You've been with us for such a long time; I've always seen you as part of our family." Aunt Amelia answered.

"Yes, Uncle Moony." Harry added. "Besides, since when do the Ancient Houses pay attention to what others think?"

"Spoken like a true Potter." Sirius exclaimed proudly.

"Back to the story," Lord Oswald smiled; amusement was evident in his face. "There has been such a strong connection between all of us. We stand as one. You see, our interest varies so that we are not in competition with each other. The Potter family tended to busy themselves with changing society, so they set up schools and fought for causes. The Bones family likes to maintain social stability by working within the government. They are usually our only link to the Ministry. The Greengrasses are interested in keeping businesses that promotes the welfare of the society. We ensure that there are enough jobs, enough supplies in the country and so on. The Blacks are more interested in the higher profit businesses." He briefly explained.

"So between the Greengrass and Black families, you practically control everything?" Harry posed inquisitively.

"Not really, the Potter and the Bones families also invest heavily in our ventures. You own a substantial number of businesses, Harry. I'm sure Charles has already mentioned it to you. Collectively, we own practically the whole society." He continued with a mischievous grin.

No wonder the Ancient families were treated like a royal family, besides their long history. The amount of social and economical influences cemented their position in the society.

"I think you're covered enough, Os. Let's move on to more important things. How was it growing up with your relatives? Did they treat you well?" Aunt Amelia asked kindly as she looked at the young Lord.

Harry ran his hand through his hair nervously. You don't have to share in detail if it makes you feel uncomfortable, Hermione thought in a soothing voice as she gave his hand a comforting squeeze.

The office grew unusually quiet.

Harry glanced around the office. His tongue grew thick with emotions when he looked at every face in the room - concern was etched on each of their faces. Despite having only met them recently, he could feel their genuine love for him. He now had a family who loved and accepted him. Emotions swamped him at that insight.

The Dursleys were only family in name but they, together with Grangers, were his true family.

He fought back the tears that were threatening to fall and it immediately made some of the occupants panicked.

"You don't have to tell us if it's too difficult." Lady Bones hurriedly interrupted as she looked at him with worry.

"Right, pup. We understand," added Sirius gently.

Uncle Oswald, who was sitting the closest to Harry, placed a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"He's fine." Hermione assured with a tender smile on her face. There were unshed tears in her eyes as she looked at them.

"Mione's right." Harry answered in a rough voice. "I'm just overwhelmed. Why don't I show you snippets of my life instead?" He picked several memories and displayed them on the wall like a movie.

It was heart-wrenching for everyone to watch the emotional abuse Harry had suffered and they knew that Harry had picked the less painful memories. Plain loathing for Harry was seen on his uncle's plump face. They realised that he was practically isolated from everyone - there were no memories of him ever having a friend as a young child. To their amusement, he shared with them the memory of setting the boa constrictor on his cousin accidentally. Harry also showed them that fateful day when Hagrid came to take him to Diagon Alley for the first time. Their moods lightened slightly when they saw that Hagrid had embarrassed his cousin by giving him a pig tail. The memory ended after that.

"Hagrid is a good man. I knew that you'd be safe with him when I entrusted you to him that night." Sirius commented evenly. "I believe we have to thank him."

"Yes he is." Harry admitted proudly. "We realised that he was innocent and wrongly punished. Tom Riddle or Voldemort was the person who opened the Chamber of Secrets and killed Moaning Myrtle. Riddle reported to the school that Hagrid was responsible for the death of his school mate and his wand was snapped when he was expelled from school."

"He's still working for Dumbledore, right? We could do something for him. I gave him my bike so that he could take you to safety. I remembered he said something about it being Dumbledore's orders."

"You are correct. Harry was in Dumbledore's custody because you were convicted. We tried to get custody of you but Dumbledore said that Lily insisted that her sister take you. He made himself your magical guardian since he would be your future Headmaster." Aunt Amelia answered as she frowned slightly.

"I didn't believe his cock and bull story but I didn't want to disrespect to your mother. I threatened that if you came into any harm, he would answer for it and he most certainly will." Oswald continued aggressively.

"It's bollocks! Lily never said that at all! Lily wouldn't leave Harry in the hands of those monsters!" Sirius growled. "I was supposed to

take custody of Harry but I was put in Azkaban. I was confident that I would not have to Azkaban because the trial would prove my innocence. Alas, I was convicted without one."

Hermione exchanged glances with Harry.

"It would seem to me that Sirius was imprisoned at a very convenient moment. It's apparent that someone took the opportunity to ensure that he would not be placed on trial, something that was unprecedented." Aunt Amelia said thoughtfully.

"We know from the trial that Riddle was anxious to get rid of the Potters because of the prophecy that predicted his downfall. Sirius turned over the role of being secret keeper to Pettigrew under Dumbledore's advice. Harry survives and Dumbledore sends someone to bring Harry to him despite the fact that Sirius was his godfather. Sirius conveniently convicted without a trial. As a result, Dumbledore was given the custody of Harry. Dumbledore kept him away from us, claiming that this was Lily's wish. Did I miss anything?" Lupin asked as he looked around the room.

"You forgot the fact that he was Head of the Wizengamot then and he had resigned immediately when the society began questioning." Hermione added.

"Riddle was not after my parents. He was after me. I heard them when the Dementors forced me to relive that memory." Harry corrected.

"So the Prophecy must've been about you. It'll make things simpler. There is a department in the Ministry that keep tracks of all the prophecies made. Only the person involved in a prophecy can request to look at it. If you're interested, I could take you there." Aunt Amelia answered.

"Don't you think Dumbledore's way too involved in this?" Lord Greengrass questioned. "I know that he needs some serious answering to do. Perhaps we should leave this mystery to someone more capable in prying." He suggested with an evil smirk. "I'll settle everything with him then."

“Not her?” Amelia answered exasperatedly.

“Oh Os, is it a wonder why your family is known as a dark family?” Sirius barked as he burst out laughing. The two teenagers looked at them in bewilderment. However, it was obvious that Lord Greengrass wanted to keep it a secret.

“I’ll arrange everything as soon as I can. We have to find a way to help Hagrid. He’s innocent after all. If my memory serves me correctly, he was placed into Azkaban for a short time due to the matter, right?”

“I’ll arrange for a trial soon so that we can clear his name. It should be relatively easy.” Lady Bones quipped. “That way, he can do magic without getting into trouble.”

“We could always give him the chance to take O.W.L, N.E.W.T, and mastery in Care for Magical Creatures. It’s his passion. I think he’d appreciate it.” Harry said excitedly.

“It sounds like a brilliant plan but you need to ask him for his permission. It isn’t nice to force it on him. Could you send us his response after you’ve talked to him?” Lady Bones asked.

“Sure,” chipped the two teenagers excitedly. The notion that their friend was going to have the opportunity to pursue what he loves thrilled them.

“It’s time for a little payback for the Dursleys, too. I’m tempted to charge him with our laws. I think we can use a bit of pranking to get back at them first, don’t we?” Lady Bones added mischievously as she looked at the two Marauders.

“I think I’m starting to enjoy being a Lord. It’ll make everything easier.” Sirius laughed. Harry couldn’t deny he would love to see his relatives being pranked by them.

Lord Greengrass chuckled. “Count me in,” smiled Os. “I’ll always have time for a little payback.”

"I think you must remember to get in line. Hermione has always wanted to do something to them." Harry laughed when he recognised the look on her face. She was formulating a plan to get back at his relatives. With all the resources at their disposal, he was sure that the Dursleys won't know what hit them.

Everyone burst into jovial laughter.

"Hermione totally fits into our family." Sirius beamed proudly.

"Aren't you a bit slow?" Aunt Amelia commented as she looked at him.

"Hey! I only met her today!"

The rest of the occupants chuckled at them as they finished their drinks. It was approaching dinner time and it was time for the Heads to return to their duties. Os was showing Sirius the ropes on running his business on the weekends and Amelia had a lot of duties to attend to.

The three Heads summoned the house elves to apparate them away after they said their goodbyes.

Harry and Hermione were making their way back to the Gryffindor tower when he remembered something.

"Why did you need to go out to search for my broom? You could've summoned it." Harry said suddenly.

Hermione grew nervous at the mention of that subject.

"I tried and it didn't come. With Crookshanks' help, I went out to find it."

Harry did not like the sound of her tone. He knew that Hermione could summon his broom from anywhere in the school to her without breaking sweat.

"We found it at the base of the tree planted in the middle of the grounds. Diggory was already there. He didn't dare to approach the tree- "

"The Whomping Willow!" Harry exclaimed. His stomach sank instantly. He knew the fate of his faithful broom. Hermione took a small bag from her pocket and enlarged it.

"Diggory retrieved them for you when Crookshanks did something that halted the movements of the tree. I'm sorry, Harry." Hermione said as she gave him the bag.

Harry silently took the bag and looked inside. He could see pieces of his first broom in it. Harry knew it could not be repaired. He felt as if he had just lost a best friend.

"No, it's okay," said Harry quietly as he lifted his head to look at Hermione. "Thank you for making the effort to retrieve the broom. I hope none of you were hurt?"

"No, we weren't." Hermione shook her head.

"That's good. I really have to thank Diggory." Harry answered as a sad smile crept onto his face. "Anyway, the Nimbus has served its purpose well."

In the stately office of Lord Greengrass, the three other Lords of the Ancient Houses were in a grim discussion.

"I'm glad that you were able to hide your emotions well." Lord Greengrass said harshly. "That deceitful actor!" Lord Greengrass hissed as he clenched his fist tightly.

"Bollocks! I swear I'm going to kill him for making Harry suffer!" Sirius growled menacingly as he punched the wall.

"He most certainly would pay. If my sixth senses are right, he has a lot to answer to. We can't let anger get in our way. We must leave it to the hands of the law." Lady Bone continued.

“Yes, it’s not worth risking anything for that person.” Lord Greengrass agreed as he withdrew a plain parchment and began writing. “If we have to take him down, we’ll have to do it fast and well.”

“So we are sticking to plan A? You’re using the press to unearth the mess?” Sirius questioned with raised eyebrows.

“A certain irritating journalist has been interested in this for a long time. I’m going to lend her a hand by giving her some useful leads. We need the public to learn the truth before we can take him out. He wouldn’t know what hit him.” Lord Oswald answered as he wrote the letter.

“Wonderful. I’ll start planning on pranking those stupid Durselys. Subjecting them to our laws is just not enough for me.” Sirius answered as he rubbed his hands.

“I’ll work on Hagrid’s case.” Lady Bones answered.

A large snowy white owl flew straight into the office and landed on the desk. She stared at Sirius with her large round amber eyes.

“Hedwig? Is something wrong? We’ve just left Hogwarts.” Sirius asked as he approached her. He quickly untied the parchment from her leg and read it.

Hi Sirius,

I’m Hermione. If you recieved the letter, it means that I didn’t have the chance to tell you that Harry had broken his broom after the match. It hit a violent tree planted in the middle of the grounds. His broom can no longer be repaired. Harry probably knows about it by the time you see the letter. I didn’t want to break the news during our meeting because it would have upset him greatly.

It’s his first broom and I believe he would be heartbroken when he learns of the truth. I’ve no idea what type of broom I should get for Harry. Would you mind helping me pick one? You can charge it to my account. Thank you.

Yours truly,

Hermione Potter

A/N: Hi, sorry for the delay. I hope you like the chapter. Thank you for all the reviews =) Thank you, frustr8dwriter for checking my work. Have a nice week ahead. Please remember to tell me how you felt about the chapter.

Chapter 17

Beta read by frustr8dwriter

The celebration was still in full swing when Harry returned to Gryffindor Tower. The Weasley twins were gracious hosts – they made sure that there were enough food and drinks to go around. The excitement of his fellow housemates was not sufficient enough to raise his spirits. Despite his slightly glum mood, he managed to mingle with his fellow Gryffindors for a little while. He made sure to thank everyone for their support with a smile on his face.

“Okay guys, I’m tired.” Harry admitted. “I’m going to turn in for the night.” The occupants of the room jeered in response.

“Oh, come on, Harry!” One of the Weasley twins shouted from the corner.

“Leave him alone, he’s had a tough day.” Oliver Wood admonished from the corner. “I still need my seeker for the next match so give him a break.”

There was a chorus of good-natured groans in the room. The Gryffindors lightheartedly slapped Harry on the back for his excellent work on the Quidditch pitch before he headed back to his quarters.

When Hermione entered their sitting room, she found Harry sitting quietly by the fire watching the flames flicker. He did not notice her presence until she laid a hand on his shoulder.

“We haven’t had dinner alone for quite some time, my love. Would you mind joining me?” Hermione implored hopefully. Harry gave her a small smile and nodded. Her smile widened immediately at his answer.

She called for Dobby and he appeared immediately with a tray of dishes. He set all the dishes on the glass dining table. Harry noted that his friend had brought all of his and Hermione’s favorite dishes

as he approached the table. He drew out the chair for Hermione before taking a seat himself.

“Dobby has really made an effort. He even brought your favourite treacle tarts.” Hermione commented, pointing at his beloved dessert.

“I know – he really outdid himself tonight. I see some of your favourites as well.” Harry answered as he served her some food. Hermione thanked him with a sweet smile before returning the gesture. Silence filled the room, so Harry picked a topic they could talk about. He knew he couldn’t talk about Quidditch so he decided on the next best thing. “Well, I was certainly surprised that Uncle Os has such a playful side to him.” Harry commented as he began to tuck in.

“Well, your father and Sirius had to learn it from someone.” Hermione returned.

“He doesn’t seem like the type, does he?”

“Uncle Moony didn’t seem to be that sort either, did he?” Hermione countered teasingly, causing Harry to chortle in delight.

Her bubbly and mischievous mood was infectious, and Harry’s spirits were soon lifted up. “My beautiful and brilliant wife is always right,” Harry declared with mock solemnity. It earned him a playful smack on the arm from his wife.

“What would Elissa say if she saw you hitting me at the dinner table?” Harry questioned. Doing his best to imitate their teacher’s stern expression, he continued in an unusually high-pitched tone, “Hermione, this is not behavior expected of a well-mannered lady.”

Sounds of cheerful laughter filled the room as Hermione cracked up. Harry did such a wonderful job mimicking their teacher’s awful pitchy voice and pinched expression that Hermione completely lost it. She was clutching her stomach with one hand and wiping the tears of laughter from her eyes with the other. “Oh stop it, Harry. She said

between breaths. Harry was grinning from ear-to-ear at the sight of his wife.

Hermione managed to compose herself after awhile. Her cheeks were still red from that hearty bout of laughter. "You know, I had every intention of cheering you up, but it seems that you're..."

The twinkle in his eyes as he gazed at his wife adoringly caught her attention and made her lose her train of thought. Harry raised his hand and gently stroked her face. "Thank you for everything, honey." The corners of his lips lifted slightly forming an affectionate smile. Hermione held his hand to her cheek as she looked into his eyes. "I don't believe that I have expressed my gratitude enough." He whispered softly.

Hermione caught his meaning quickly and the young couple, in their hurry to retire for the night, left their dinner unfinished.

The good-looking Hufflepuff captain was at his house table talking to his friends when Harry and Hermione approached him the next morning. Harry was anxious to thank Cedric Diggory personally. "Good morning, Diggory." Harry greeted. The occupants of the Hufflepuff table immediately buzzed at the sight of Harry looking completely unscathed. Judging from the long fall they had witnessed the previous evening, most of them expected him to still be in the Hospital Wing.

Surprise crossed Diggory's face when he turned to see Harry standing behind him. It was replaced with a friendly smile when he saw Hermione was with him. "Hi Hermione," Cedric began warmly as he stood up to face the couple. "Hey Potter, how are you feeling? I didn't think that Madame Pomfrey would release you this quickly. I'm truly sorry about the loss of your broom." Diggory continued as he looked at Harry. Harry never realised how tall Diggory was – he towered over Harry.

"Please call me Harry. I'm actually perfectly fine – I didn't even need medical attention." Harry explained. "Hermione told me that you tried to help retrieve my broom. Thanks for that."

“No, no – It was the least I could do. I mean, we were so close when you fell. I was too shocked to grab you.” He admitted. “I’m really glad you weren’t hurt by the fall.”

Harry heard the relief in Cedric’s voice and that intrigued him. “You didn’t have to try to catch me – if was perfectly fine for you not to. We were in the middle of a Quidditch match...”

“Yeah, but the game was already over when you caught the Snitch. Moreover, we’re all in the same school. I don’t want anyone to be hurt unnecessarily. Since I couldn’t prevent your fall, I could, at the very least, go find your broom when it was blown away from the pitch.” Cedric replied.

A friendly smile touched Harry’s lips at Diggory’s response. He found himself liking the sixth-year. “Well, thanks anyway.” Harry repeated sincerely. “By the way, you did a brilliant job training your team. They were excellent on the field.”

The towering Hufflepuff averted his glance shyly. “I’m lucky to have a team who’s willing to work hard. Unfortunately, I don’t think we were as good as your team.”

“I think that the distinguishing factor was that the Gryffindors have an obsessed captain hell-bent on winning. He made them practice every second they were free.” Hermione interjected. Harry and Cedric laughed genially at her remark.

“I guess that explains a great deal why the pitch was booked almost all the time. Wood is in his final year, I presume?” Cedric asked with raised brows.

“That’s an excellent guess.” Hermione chuckled. “Maybe you can try for the Cup again next year. Their captain will have graduated by then.”

“That would only be possible if they don’t replace Wood with another seventh-year.” Cedric added in amusement.

“Then you’ll get your chance – we don’t have any sixth-years on our team.” Harry said.

“I’m glad – I’d really love to win it. After all it would’ve been my final year. I can’t even remember the last time Hufflepuff actually won the Quidditch Cup.”

“I think it’s too soon to lose hope this year. We might be squaring off again if your team continues to do well.” Harry remarked. “I think it’s a pretty good possibility, actually.”

“You know that I’ll be looking forward to a rematch.” Cedric laughed. “Would you like to join us for breakfast? After all, you’re the only Gryffindors here.” He continued politely. Harry glanced around the Hufflepuff table to gauge their responses.

“You don’t have to worry.” Cedric began. “They won’t mind – they know you’re close friends with Bones. If all of Hufflepuff was against you, Bones would’ve heard about it when she befriended you.”

“Thanks for the invite – we’d love to.” Harry replied as he pulled a chair out for Hermione. She expressed her gratitude while Harry took the seat next to her.

“Think nothing of it – I think it’s more comfortable to sit down and chat. Plus, I’m sure you’re both hungry.” Cedric said as he sat down himself.

The sixth-years sitting near Harry engaged him in a conversation about Quidditch as soon as he’d settled in. Cedric, seeing that Hermione really had no interest in Quidditch, began talking to her about school. Since Hermione had a keen interest in academics, they were soon engrossed in a conversation about their classes.

“Good morning!” Susan greeted excitedly as she approached. “I couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw you two sitting at the Hufflepuff table!” Her face reddened slightly when she realized that Harry and Hermione were sitting with Cedric. “Good morning, Diggory.” She added with a nod in his direction.

“The same to you, Bones. Please join us.” Cedric invited with an affable smile. His friendly grin made Susan’s knees weak. “Oh hello, Greengrass.” Cedric greeted. He immediately stood up when he noticed the blonde Slytherin standing quietly behind Susan.

“Good morning.” Daphne returned politely, but with cool indifference. Her eyes narrowed slightly at Cedric’s reaction.

Hermione arched a brow questioningly at Daphne’s tone, but said nothing. Daphne and Susan soon sat down.

“How are you feeling, Harry?” Daphne asked with concern.

“I’m good, Daph. I had several bruises and cuts, but Mione patched me up. It was nothing she couldn’t handle.” Harry smiled at his wife proudly.

“I would expect nothing less from the most brilliant witch of the century!” Susan commented with a smile as she helped herself to some food.

“Well, the armour took most of the impact.” Harry shrugged as he bit into a piece of toast.

The group caught up on what each of them did the previous evening. Seeing that the new additions and Harry were engaged in their own conversation, Hermione and Cedric continued with theirs. However, she noticed that Cedric was not as focused on the topic as he had been earlier – before they were interrupted by the entry of their friends. Curious about the reason for his distraction, she followed the line of his occasional glances. He was sneaking peeks at Daphne.

The stunning Slytherin was smiling dazzlingly as she animatedly talked about her pets’ latest antics. Hermione was not surprised that Cedric was enthralled by her radiant smile. She chose to focus on eating, leaving Cedric to admire her friend.

His eyes haven't left her since she sat down. Harry's unmistakeable voice rang in their shared awareness. Hermione chuckled when she realized that Harry had noticed too. Give me some credit would you, Mione? It's so obvious. Susan would've noticed it as well, if she wasn't so busy admiring Diggory.

Alright – I'll admit you're not as obtuse as I thought.

He rolled his eyes in faux annoyance. Quit stereotyping, my love. Harry admonished. You know, they'd be a pretty odd couple if they got together.

Why would you say that? Hermione returned, looking at her husband pointedly.

I see Daphne as being like the moon – calm, mysterious, dignified, and alluring. Cedric, on the other hand, is more like the sun – he is warm, open, gregarious, and friendly. I think their personalities are too contradicting.

Who's to say they'll get together? Grant it, Daphne's attractive, so it's difficult not to be enthralled by her beauty.

True – I think every male sitting at the Hufflepuff table has been staring at her since she got here. I believe that there may be something there. Are you up for a little wager? Harry challenged.

Hermione couldn't help but be amused about Harry's ability to concentrate on two conversations at the same time while asking Daphne some questions while he playfully challenged her through their mind link without missing a beat. With arched brows, Harry stared at Hermione.

"Is something wrong, honey?" Harry asked aloud.

"No, not at all." Hermione said after clearing her throat.

"Diggory, do I have something on my face?" Daphne inquired frostily, fixing her icy blue eyes on the handsome Hufflepuff.

“Uh, no you don’t.” Cedric responded, quickly averting his eyes away from her. He tried to concentrate on eating. She rolled her eyes in irritation. Harry and Hermione exchanged amused looks.

Suddenly, the sounds of owls flying in filled the Hall. Harry immediately reached up to grab his copy of the newspaper.

‘The Ancient Houses Break Off All Relations With Weasleys’ The headline announced. Harry read the article and discovered that it was written just as Lord Greengrass had dictated. The hall began to buzz as the students began to read the same article.

“Mr. Potter!” Dumbledore called out loudly from his seat in the Great Hall. He was holding a copy of the Daily Prophet. He looked paler than usual. “I need to see you immediately after breakfast.”

“Headmaster, if this about our demands, then I must decline respectfully.” Harry answered confidently as he stood up. The Headmaster’s eyes widened at Harry’s response.

“P-Pardon?” Dumbledore stammered as he raised his half-moon spectacles to stare stonily at the young Lord. Harry’s confidence did not falter.

“I’m aware that you’re the Headmaster, Professor Dumbledore. However, I believe that the actions of the Ancient Houses have nothing to do with my Hogwarts education.” Harry explained coolly.

“As Headmaster, it is my duty to correct your behaviour whenever necessary. You are stirring up needless trouble. You will cease it at once!” Dumbledore commanded as he stood up.

“Needless trouble?” Harry echoed vociferously as he glared at the Headmaster. His far-fetched comments were incensing him. The hall became unnaturally quiet at his outburst. Hermione held on to his arm, which immediately had a calming effect on Harry. He sighed before responding. “I don’t think that it’s too much trouble to ask for a formal authority, not that I need to explain myself to you. You maybe my

Headmaster, but you are not a Lord of an Ancient and Noble house. Pardon my arrogance, but I am Lord Gryffindor, Head of the Ancient and Noble House of Potter. You're in no position to instruct me about politics. I believe I will leave that up to my advisors – the Heads of the three other Ancient Houses."

"Such haughtiness befitting of a Potter." Professor Snape spat from the side as he glared at Harry. Professor Lupin wanted to refute Snape's statement but Harry stopped him with a pleading look in his eyes. He did not want to get his uncle into trouble since it was his battle. Professor Lupin acknowledged Harry's request and backed off.

Turning to his Potions Master, Harry spoke boldly. "That's Lord Gryffindor to you. You have no right to comment, Professor Snape. You'll do well to remember who you owe your life to." He admonished. The Potions Master turned with rage but held his tongue. The crowd in the hall began to murmur at the sight of their Potions Master being put down by a third-year student.

Harry ignored the enraged Professor and tuned to his Headmaster. "It seems to me that you are allied with the Weasleys, Professor Dumbledore. Or have I misinterpreted your outburst?" Harry asked idly. The underlying threat in his tone was not lost on anyone.

Harry looked directly at his Headmaster. Dumbledore tried to make him cower with the intensity of his piercing stare, but Harry held his ground. The tension in the hall grew to an unprecedented level and the silence became deafening. It was as if everyone was holding a collective breath and their eyes were fixed on the exchange. After a long while, Dumbledore finally lowered his gaze slightly.

"I was merely trying to remind you that your actions will have consequences." Dumbledore said calmly as he sat down. The Headmaster had lost his entire attitude.

"Well, I thank you for your advice, Headmaster." Harry replied graciously. "The Weasleys will be fine if they choose to admit to and apologise for their mistakes." Harry went on before sitting down at the Hufflepuff table to finish his meal.

“I must say that I have to agree with Lord Gryffindor.” Professor McGonagall added as she looked at the students meaningfully. She could see the some of her students were starting to form negative opinions about Harry. “I believe that the Weasleys should make a public apology for the trouble they have caused him. It’s my duty as the Head of Gryffindor House to ensure that my students have the humility to ask for forgiveness for all the injustices they’ve committed. I’ll make sure that they apologise to you before Monday, Lord Gryffindor.” She shot a side-glance at Dumbledore and noted his discomfort. She went back to eating her breakfast. The rest of the staff nodded in response to Professor McGonagall’s statement.

“Pardon my interference,” Professor Flitwick interjected, “but Mr. Potter does have the right to demand an apology. The Elder Mr. Weasley tried to attack Mr. Potter from behind after the Wizard’s Duel had concluded. An apology is a small thing to ask for such a disgraceful act.”

Once again, the rest of the staff, save Professor Snape, agreed heartily with him.

“I was unaware of the circumstances.” Professor Dumbledore added lamely. He sensed he would lose the support of his staff if he insisted on punishing Harry. He wisely focused his attention on eating his breakfast.

Harry nodded in Professor McGonagall’s direction to show his gratitude. The elder witch smiled warmly in return before she returned to her breakfast.

We’ll get him soon. Hermione promised as she gave his hand a comforting squeeze. We’ll get him for all the things he allowed to happen to you.

Harry nodded as he looked at the ancient man sitting at the staff table. Yes, that day will come soon. He thought.

Arthur Weasley rushed out of the elevator and hurriedly entered his cramped department. There were only a few people working under him. "Good morning." He greeted swiftly. Without waiting for a reply, he walked into this cramped office. He slumped into his creaking office chair and caught his breath. Mr. Weasley was surprised when he saw his boss' young assistant enter his office.

"Good morning. " He greeted sheepishly as he tried to make room for his guest. There was a disgusted look on the assistant's face as he beheld the sad condition of the office.

"You needn't bother, Weasley. The Minister of Magic has decided that we no longer need your services since your family apparently needs you more." The assistant said curtly. Seeing a befuddled expression on Weasley's face, he immediately set a copy of the Daily Prophet on his cluttered desk. Mr. Weasley's eyes widened after scanning the article briefly.

"I will give you a few moments to yourself. Thank you for your hard work. I won't bother to see you out." The assistant added before striding out of the room.

Arthur Weasley had faithfully worked in the Ministry since he graduated from Hogwarts. The sudden termination of his services shocked him. He collapsed into his seat, trying to figure out what had exactly transpired. "Fired?" He said to his empty office in a daze.

The headline of the article caught his attention. He grabbed the copy off his cluttered desk and read. He had even more pressing matters to deal with. The Ancient Houses were preparing to declare a war on his family if their demands for a public apology were not met. Those who close to be friendly with the Weasleys would be treated the same. He swiped the perspiration off his forehead as he let the news sink in. The Ancient Houses controlled almost everything in the Magical World. It was no wonder he was sacked. "I need to talk to Dumbledore about this." He said to no one in particular before frantically searching his desk for a pot of green powder. He was suddenly distracted by the sound of fluttering wings. It was

Dumbledore's familiar, Fawkes. His spirit lifted at the sight of the Phoenix.

He took the letter from Fawkes and the phoenix disappeared at once. He frantically opened the message and his stomach sunk as he read the note.

Arthur,

As a friend, I advise you to consider the idea of giving in to their requests. It's all you can do.

Sorry I can only help you this much.

It was unsigned and Arthur understood the underlying message of the note. Albus Dumbledore did not want to be involved with this matter. Arthur could not believe that he would cut ties because it would be dire to his reputation. He clenched his fists until his knuckles turned white. "I didn't even ask him to join me in a war. After all my family has done for him!" He shouted as he kicked the table. Pain shot up his leg with the contact. He instantly grabbed his leg and hobbled around the room. Everything seemed to have gone wrong. He needed to meet with his children soon.

In the Hospital Wing, Madam Pomfrey was shocked by the sudden outburst of a certain seventh-year redhead. "What! He can't be serious!" Percy growled as he threw the covers off his body. Ron tried to restrain his brother but to no avail.

"Mr. Weasley, you need to calm down now. You don't want to kill yourself by exerting your magical core." She rebuked as she tried to shove the boy back into his bed.

"Percy, don't be daft and get back into bed." Ron pleaded as he helped the healer hold his brother down.

The warning that his life was in danger did little to calm Percy's growing temper. "I will not apologise to that brat for what he has done to my family! He's the reason why Ginny's in St. Mungo's!"

"Percy, you have to rest!" Ron insisted calmly. He continued to struggle against their restraints.

Seeing that his brother's pleas were not helping, she swiftly put him to sleep with a simple spell. As soon as she was done with her incantation, Percy collapsed back into bed and slept like a log. Madam Pomfrey shook her head at his display of emotion. She could not believe that Percy Weasley could not see why he needed to apologize to Lord Potter. Without another word, she went to busy herself with the preparation of some potions.

Ron sank into the chair beside Percy's bed tiredly. It took great effort to restrain his brother. Ron knew that they needed to apologise. It was the only way that he could get his housemates to talk to him again. If he didn't, he was sure that their father would disown them. He didn't fancy living in the Magical World without a name. The thought of being subjected to more ridicule terrified him so he made up his mind to do it, no matter how reluctant he was.

Arthur Weasley was not surprised to see his two eldest children waiting for him at the Burrow when he arrived home. They had puzzled expressions on their faces as they greeted their father.

"What exactly happened?" Bill, his first-born asked as he sat next to his father. "The Goblins fired me today on the grounds that they cherished their relationship to the Ancient Houses far too much..."

"My boss gave me the boot too." Charlie interrupted. "What feud do we have with the Ancient Houses?"

The Weasley patriarch began to explain to his older sons what caused the rift between the families. The list of injustices Percy and Ron committed was abysmal and both Bill and Charlie grew livid upon hearing about them.

“Dad, why didn’t it occur to you that we had to issue a formal apology? We have to send the letter as soon as possible and we need Ron and Percy to be here when we do.” Bill said as he summoned the necessary stationary into the living room. Her father tenderly rubbed his forehead.

“You won’t believe how many things that I had to set right these few days. However, that is not an excuse.” Arthur admitted worriedly.

“I’ll get those two idiots home. Bill, you start on that letter.” Charlie interrupted as he stood up. He threw some floo powder into the fireplace and disappeared into the flames.

“I’m sorry that you had to find out about Mum and the kids this way. I always thought that you knew what was going on and just chose to ignore it. This was the main reason I moved out as soon as I could – but Mum’s still my mother.” Bill added sheepishly as he averted his eyes. “I wish I could’ve done something about my little sister.” Bill said sadly. Arthur Weasley looked tiredly at his oldest son.

“I’m so sorry to have dragged you into this mess, son.” It was all he could muster. Bill draped his arms around his father and hugged him.

“I thought I’d find you here.” Charlie said as he folded his arms. “You need to get upstairs and gather some of your things. I am taking the both of you home so we can have a family meeting. We need to post that apology today.”

“Why are you here?” Ron asked in bafflement. “Why aren’t you at work?”

“Well, because of what the two of you have been up to, I was fired.” Charlie answered. “We need to wake Percy so that we can include his personal apology in the letter.” He continued as he took his wand and cast a spell on him.

“Charlie? What are you doing here?” Percy questioned, completely confused. “Can you believe that brat? He actually demanded that we apologise to him! I refuse! After what he has done to our sister...”

“Shut up, Perce. You obviously don’t realize what you’ve done. You’re such a disgrace - attacking a Lord of an Ancient House from behind? Don’t even get me started on Ginny!” Charlie bellowed. “Because of your combined actions, Dad, Bill, and I are out of jobs until we settle this thing properly!”

Percy trembled in fear at the sight of his enraged brother. He had never seen his normally good-natured brother so angry. “We are leaving now. I refuse to hear another word from you. We are apologising and that’s final!” Charlie concluded. “Change into some clothes now, Perce. I’ll be speaking to Madam Pomfrey about your temporary release. He gave his younger brother a final warning look before heading out of the room to speak to the matron.

As the whole Weasley affair unfolded upstairs, Harry and Hermione were enjoying the feeling of the breeze blowing into their faces as they walked down the slope towards the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Their destination was the wooden hut where Hagrid lived. With their hands entwined, they talked freely as Harry swung their hands playfully.

“I definitely think we’ll have a chance to plan another wedding soon.” Harry said as he smiled at his wife.

“Sirius and Aunt Amelia?” Hermione inquired. “I’ve noticed it, too. It’s hard not to see the occasional touches and looks they send to each other. From my impression of him in your parents’ journals, he doesn’t seem to be the type to settle down.”

Harry shrugged. “You never know. I mean, he was stuck in Azkaban for so long that he might’ve changed his mind.”

The pair was nearing the hut and saw that there was smoking rising from the chimney. Harry could hear excited barks emanating from the house as they approached.

“Down Fang.” They could hear Hagrid say to his dog. Fang continued to bark excitedly.

“Who migh’be comin’ here at this ‘ime?” Hagrid questioned as he went to open the door. He was surprised to see two teenagers beaming at him.

“Hi Hagrid.” They greeted cordially and in unison.

“Blimey, it’s the two o’yeh. Come in!” Hagrid welcomed with a beaming smile. “Wan’a ‘ave some cakes? It’s freshly baked.” Hagrid said proudly as he put the kettle on.

“No thanks, Hagrid.” Harry answered quickly. He did not fancy breaking his teeth on Hagrid’s pastries.

“So Hagrid, how’ve you been?” Hermione asked warmly as she sat down.

“Grea’ as usual. ‘ow’re yeh? Mus’ve given yeh a bad scare when Miss Weasley ta kill’yeh.” He replied as he looked at Hermione worriedly with his beetle-black eyes. An affectionate smile was plastered on her face when she answered.

“Oh, I’m fine – Harry made sure of it.” She glanced at Harry.

“Tha’s good. ‘arry’s supposed to take care of yeh.” He smiled when he saw the affection the two teenagers had for each other. “ ‘Ermione’s a good girl like yer mum. Take good care of ‘er, ‘Arry.” He continued as he plopped into his chair. Harry grinned as he promised to do just that.

“Hagrid, we wanted to talk to you about something important. You know how we discovered last year that you were innocent of the charges that lead to your expulsion from Hogwarts? Well, we were wondering if you wanted to you name to be cleared so that you can practice magic again.”

“Yeh mean do Magic legally? Clear my name?” Hagrid echoed with an astonished expression on his face.

“As you know, I’m now the Lord of the House of Potter. We, the Heads of the Ancient and Noble Houses, should be able to take the necessary steps to present your case to the Wizengamot and use our influence to officially clear your name. You’re innocent, Hagrid, you should get your wand back.”

To their surprise, big droplets of tears began to descend down his cheeks and into his thick beard. “I can’ believe that yeh’d wan’ to do ‘hat for me. I’ve been living wi’this for many years. Dumbledore wo’ ‘ave done it if ‘e could. It’s useless.”

“No it’s not, Hagrid. I personally think that although you trusted the Headmaster to act in your best interest, I don’t think that he really did.” Hermione commented. “But that’s another story.”

“Just think, Hagrid, you can continue to pursue your love of Magical Creatures. When you’re cleared you can take your O.W.L.s, N.E.W.T.s, and Mastery on the subject. You can dedicate your time researching them and imparting your knowledge to the younger generation. We have confidence that we can help you.” Harry persuaded as he looked at his giant friend.

Tears were still coming down at the mention of a chance to pursue his forsaken dreams. He had given up all hope and resigned himself to his fate. So many years had passed and no one thought of reviewing his case.

“Do you really think it’s possible, Harry?” Hagrid asked hopefully. Dumbledore kept insisting that it would be impossible to clear his name.

“Lady Bones assured me that it can be done easily. She thinks we can clear your name by the middle of next week. As for your education, we can always sponsor your training to get you ready for

your exams. Think of it as a thank you for all the help you've given me over the years. I think that you'll ace them."

"Oh Hagrid, I've always felt that you deserved more recognition. The knowledge you have about Magical Creatures is simply astounding. I always learn something new from your classes because you give us knowledge that can only be attained through experience." Hermione added as she laid a hand on his arm. "Give us a chance to bring your case before the Wizengamot. Lady Bones is already looking into your case."

"Thank yeh, 'Arry and 'Ermione." Hagrid muttered emotionally as he gave both their hands a squeeze.

After their visit, Harry indulged Hermione by doing some revising. He was certain that he knew his material well, but he reviewed his notes anyway to make Hermione feel better. She usually felt insecure about her exams if she didn't do some extensive revision. Daphne, Susan, Neville, and Luna joined them for an impromptu study session.

The Weasley twins, who would've been included in the study session, had gone home with their brothers for their family meeting. Before their departure, they surprised Harry by telling him that they understood the reasons for his actions. Harry took the opportunity to reiterate his stand that they would never come to a point where they had to pick a side – it was far too cruel to them.

Harry snapped back into focus when he heard Susan ask a question.

"How is it that you two make sense of transfiguration?" Susan demanded as she closed her book. Harry and Hermione had just looked up at their friend when they felt Hedwig's amusement. She began to hoot loudly and it sounded suspiciously like she was laughing. The redhead narrowed her eyes into slits and glared at the owl perched behind her.

"I swear that Hedwig is laughing at me." Susan said as she looked at the snowy owl.

A delighted smile spread across Harry's face. "I won't lie – she is laughing at you." Harry said as he winked at his owl. "Hedwig thinks that Transfiguration is simple. She doesn't understand why you don't." Hedwig hooted in affirmation.

"Be nice, Hedwig." Hermione reprimanded gently without lifting her head. She was too busy reviewing Ancient Runes to truly involve herself in their conversation.

"Hedwig is offering to coach you." Harry continued. "Would you like that? I think she's brilliant at theory work."

Susan looked at Harry and Hedwig incredulously. "Honestly? She can teach? I don't have a mind-link with her. How will she instruct me?" Susan questioned.

"That problem can be easily fixed." Harry continued as he conjured up a huge box of sand. "Hedwig can write." He explained. To prove his point, Hedwig confidently hopped to the box full of sand and scratched: "Yes, I can" in beautiful neat letters.

"Why is it that the abilities of your pets never fail to surprise me?" Susan asked as she stared at the owl. Hedwig turned her head slightly so she could fix her amber eyes on her.

"She's one of a kind." Harry complimented as he smiled at his owl. "She taught herself to write so that she could make a birthday card for Hermione." Harry chuckled as he reached out and gently stroked his owl fondly. "My beautiful clever owl." He cooed lovingly as he tickled her. "Is it any wonder why I am wrapped around your talon?" He asked softly as he gave her an owl treat. She hooted in joy before turning back to continue to stare at Susan.

There was amusement in Hermione's eyes when she glanced up at him. "I couldn't help it. She was being so adorable." Harry defended as he scooted closer to her. "You can't be jealous of my familiar?" He asked in mock surprise.

"What if I am?" She asked teasingly as she leaned into him.

“I think that I’d have to put a stop to that.” Harry answered before his hands swooped to her sides and began to mercilessly tickle her. Hermione collapsed on the floor, giggling uncontrollably as Harry continued his torment.

“Stop, Harry! Please stop!!” She screamed as she laughed and cried at the same time. There was a cheeky grin on his face when he stopped. Hermione was lying on the floor and panting hard.

“So are you still jealous of Hedwig?” Harry asked teasingly. Leaning forward, he planted a kiss on her nose before helping her up.

“Potter, you are so dead for making that move!” She threatened as she pointed a finger at Harry. There was a look of indignation on her face. Harry chuckled as he grabbed her and tried to pull her into his embrace. She wiggled in his arms, trying to break away from his hug.

“No, you’re not really mad.” He whispered in her ear. His warm breath made her squirm slightly. “You wanted me to treat you like Hedwig, remember?” Hermione turned around to face him. With narrowed eyes, she playfully shoved his chest away. Harry laughed brightly in response.

Harry then gathered her close so that they could share a book. Hermione, content to be leaning against Harry, abandoned her thick tome on Runes and chose to read Harry’s book on Charms instead. They soon settled down and began studying again.

Their friends were delighted to watch the couple tease each other. They too settled into their studying. Hedwig helped Susan and Neville with Transfiguration. The group spent the rest of their weekend catching up their work.

Harry was very sure that the Daily Prophet would earn a lot from this edition since everyone was looking forward to reading the apology that the Ancient Houses had insisted on. The Weasley family published a full page apology, listing all the injustices they had

committed against Lord Gryffindor and Lord Black. The length of the list and the severity of the injustice astounded the Magical World.

The sounds of the gasp coming from the staff upon reading the article was a clear indication of their disgust and shock. Percy and Ron also made a public apology during breakfast in the Great Hall. In light of his recent actions, Percy was removed from his post as Head Boy and was replaced by a fellow Gryffindor. Harry graciously accepted the apology and was glad that the ordeal was over. Even though the sanctions as against the Weasleys had been lifted, most of the students still chose to ignore Ron and Percy. Their true colours were finally exposed. The Weasley twins did not suffer from the brief clash. The three elder Weasleys had their jobs back, but Arthur was placed on a long-term leave until he could settle the affairs of his family properly.

The apology also sparked another wave. This time it was directed at the Headmaster. The Weasleys actions raised several issues such as the unchecked power of the Headmaster of Hogwarts. Ron admitted to spying on Harry at the Headmaster's behest. This was a serious abuse of power and the staff at Hogwarts became interested in the Headmaster's motives. As a result, the School Board requested a meeting with the Headmaster to discuss this allegation.

As the storm took place upstairs in the Headmaster's office, Harry and his friends at the Gryffindor table talking. Breakfast had long ended but since the teachers were all involved in the meeting, lessons were starting later that morning. Hermione contemplated the consequences of their demands and noted that it was a brilliant political move. Lord Greengrass had intentionally used the situation to pave the way for Dumbledore's punishment. He was using society rules to apply enough pressure to make him talk. The opposition against Dumbledore was weak, but it was slowly gaining momentum as people began to question the actions of the Leader of the Light. She knew that if the whole truth came to light at this critical period, it could spell the end of Dumbledore's political career.

"It was a totally inspired move." Harry agreed aloud after hearing Hermione's thoughts. "It seems as though Uncle Os wants to crush him."

Hermione, noticing that everyone but Daphne was engrossed in their own conversations, continued. "I don't think that's his intention – at least not yet. I think he's waiting for the opportune moment so that we'll be portrayed in a positive light when we do finally bring him to justice. I think he is merely reducing Dumbledore's support by encouraging doubt."

"I'm almost positive that's what Father is doing. It's a good move since Dumbledore enjoys far too much support." Daphne added thoughtfully.

"Your father is such a seasoned politician." Harry commented as he cringed inwardly. "I wouldn't dare pit myself against him."

"I can't imagine what will happen. I want to think the tide is working in our favour." Hermione admitted. "I am just glad that Lord Greengrass is on our side. We can leave things in his capable hands and simply sit back and watch how this will all play out."

"You're worrying needlessly." Daphne pointed out. "Father will act in the best interests of the Ancient Houses – he can't do anything but that because of the pact. Yes, I'd love to see what the outcome will be." Daphne smiled – it was obvious that she shared a love for politics with her father.

Across the table, Susan, Neville, and Cedric were involved in a light-hearted conversation. To their surprise, Cedric and some of his friends decided to join them at the Gryffindor table for breakfast. The other sixth-year Hufflepuffs were talking to the Weasley twins. Everyone was getting along really well. Everyone, except Daphne and Cedric – it seemed that Daphne did not care for the amiable Hufflepuff Quidditch Captain. Daphne continued to blatantly ignore him and no one understood why.

It was almost noon by the time the School Board meeting concluded. Sometime during the meeting, most of the Hogwarts staff filtered out one by one so they could teach their classes. Albus Dumbledore was pacing around his large office. He was not too concerned about the

Board's doubts – it was the kind of situation that would pass as soon as interest died down. All he needed to do was to lie low for awhile.

What was weighing most heavily on his mind was his earlier conversation with Harry. He could see that Harry distrusted him. Harry was even more out of his control now that he had the support of the rest of the Ancient Houses. It also did not help that his Deputy Headmistress no longer supported him when it came to Harry's affairs. Why can't anyone believe that I am doing all of these things for Harry's sake?

"This cannot continue." He said aloud to his empty office. "It will be the end of the Magical World if he refuses to be guided properly." He needed to have a talk with Harry soon. With that thought in mind, he set out to look for Harry.

Harry, Hermione, and Neville had just completed their Charms test.

"I guess the test went okay." Harry said as he swung his bag around his body and fell in step with Hermione. They were walking along the corridor towards the Dining Hall since it was time for lunch.

"Do really think so? I may have written a bit too much. Do you think Professor Flitwick will understand the point I was trying to make?" Hermione asked worriedly.

Harry placed a soothing hand on his frantic wife. "I'm sure you did an excellent job. Professor Flitwick will grade it an Outstanding – the way he's done it for the past two years. Besides, it's only a test." Harry answered with a comforting smile.

"I can't believe that for once, I am able to do almost everything." Neville added with a wide grin. "It's all thanks to you, Hermione."

Harry chuckled. "Well, you've been nice enough to study with her all week while I've been busy with all those practices. You should get credit for all the time you put in."

Neville shrugged. "What did you expect us to do? You should've seen her – she looked so lost without you."

Hermione's brows knitted into a frown at Neville's remark and grumbled lightly. "Neville, you're no better than the others – teasing me about that." Daphne and Susan constantly reminded her of the day she lost her temper because a group of Gryffindors wouldn't stop talking about the Quidditch match. "I really need to talk to the girls about that – they are getting out of hand. I was only irritated because Quidditch was all anyone could talk about."

Not to mention that it didn't help that Quidditch was the reason for my absence. Harry thought to himself. Harry held his tongue because he knew it would anger his wife. However, he had already completed the sentence in his head. It was during these moments when he found their mind-link to be a bother. Hermione spun around and glared at him heatedly.

"Don't you start, Harry." She growled threateningly.

Harry was undaunted by her icy stare. He continued calmly. "If I were you, I wouldn't like the thing that kept me away from you." Harry entwined his fingers with hers and gazed at her with love in his eyes. They halted their steps when they saw their Headmaster approaching them. Harry stiffened immediately.

"Good afternoon Lord Potter, Miss Granger, and Mr. Longbottom." Dumbledore greeted politely.

"Good afternoon, Headmaster." They chorused.

"How can I help you?" Harry continued courteously as he strengthened his mental shields. From the way Dumbledore was looking at him, Harry knew Dumbledore wanted something from him.

Dumbledore's white eyebrow quirked up momentarily at Harry's reaction. "I was wondering if you would mind having a chat with me." He said hopefully. Harry's expression remained aloof as he eyed the

Headmaster. "If it'll make you more comfortable, Miss Granger can come along as well."

Harry and Hermione exchanged glances. "I think I'll be fine on my own. Why don't you go on and have lunch with our friends?" Harry said. You can always get help if I needed it.

She nodded her head and answered. "Sure, Harry. We'll see you later." I'll listen in on your conversation.

Harry smiled. "Enjoy your lunch. Neville, make sure Hermione eats something and doesn't spend the entire lunch period studying. I'll see you in awhile."

He turned and followed the Headmaster to his office.

As usual, all the portraits in the brightly-lit office were asleep as they entered. Fawkes greeted him with a soothing song. A smile broke out on his face as he admired the fiery bird.

"It seems as if Fawkes has missed you." Dumbledore commented with a twinkle in his eye. He gestured for Harry to take a seat. "I've taken the liberty to request some food to be served. I'm sure you're hungry after your lessons. So please help yourself." He added as he sat behind his desk.

"Thank you." Harry replied politely and began to serve himself as he waited for the Headmaster to speak.

"I'm sure you're wondering why I wanted to speak with you privately." Dumbledore began. "Before I go into that, I must first apologise for my previous actions. I should never have sent Mr. Weasley to keep an eye on you. Also, when I sent Professor Snape to look after you, it was not my intention to put you in harm's way. Believe me; I wanted to make sure you were alright."

"I see." Harry answered, completely unconvinced. "You can't expect me to believe that you had my best interests at heart when you sent a teacher, who detests me to look after me, do you? Besides, I find it

difficult to understand why you would need someone to keep an eye on me.”

“I guessed that you’d learned about Lord Black over the holidays and wanted to seek him out for revenge. After all, many believed that he betrayed your parents. They also thought he was coming to Hogwarts to find you. Because of this threat, I asked Mr. Weasley to keep track of your movements. I wanted him to report to me in the event that you decided to leave Hogwarts without permission. I needed to be able to send someone to protect you.” Dumbledore explained benevolently.

“Why did you send Professor Snape if you knew I might be meeting Sirius. You knew they were enemies! Professor Snape wanted to kill him on the spot! He was completely insane with the need to see my godfather punished.” Harry argued hotly as he set his cutlery down on the plate. “Why are you so concerned about my well-being anyway?” He persisted.

“You’re my student. As Headmaster, I have to keep you out of harm’s way.” Dumbledore responded as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“You placed me in harm’s way the moment you sent Professor Snape to follow me.” Harry returned before pointing out, “If I remember correctly, the proper protocol was for you to alert my Head of House, which is Professor McGonagall. She’d have dealt with the situation with more finesse.”

“Well, she didn’t know the location of where you were going. She’s never been inside that lair. Professor Snape learned of it by accident, as such, he was the best person to follow you.”

“I didn’t even know where I was heading until I stumbled across the place. How did you know that’s where I was headed?” Harry demanded, his eyes narrowing into slits.

“If Sirius was the reason you left the castle, the lair was the only logical choice. There aren’t too many places on the grounds he could

hide in. I learned that they spent some time there when your father saved Severus by dragging him away from there during a full moon.” He answered logically.

Harry was too lazy to argue. Instead, he took his wand and pointed to his head. A silvery mist surrounded his wand and he projected it on the wall. The memory of the night that Professor Snape barged in on him and Sirius began to play. Dumbledore watched the scene unfold and could not refute Harry’s claims.

Severus Snape was so bent on revenge that he did not think about Harry’s safety. It was clear that Harry resolved the situation at the risk of his own life. “I’m sorry that things turned out that way. I do thank you for saving Professor Snape’s life.”

Harry shrugged it off. “If it hadn’t worked out, I would’ve sought to avenge my godfather. I want you to give me a straight answer, Headmaster. Why do you feel the need to be so involved in my life?” Harry demanded.

“It’s nothing more than concern for my charges. I really only want what’s best for you. You’re a very special person and you have to trust me to guide you in fulfilling your destiny.”

“Destiny? What destiny?” Harry questioned as he met Dumbledore’s gaze. The Headmaster remained tight-lipped.

“Trust is a two-way thing. Your actions of late have not encouraged me to do so. I believe that we have nothing left to say to each other, Headmaster.” Harry declared coolly as he stood up. “Thank you for lunch.”

“Wait, Harry!” Dumbledore called out.

“I am acknowledged as an adult in the Wizarding World, so you really can’t tell me what to do. If you can’t reveal this bit of information, then I can’t trust you. Hermione will not, either.” Harry stated plainly. “I will ask you one last time – what destiny?” He looked pointedly at the Headmaster.

Dumbledore shook his head violently. "It's far too early to tell you. I don't want you to waste your time dwelling on this. You are only young once – I want you to enjoy your school experience. Besides, there really is no need for you to know at the moment."

Harry sighed. There were times when Dumbledore sounded exactly like Edmund.

"If I don't need to know, then why'd you bring it up?" Harry muttered under his breath. "Very well, let me ask you another question. Why did you insist on placing me in the custody of my relatives?" Harry asked in irritation.

"They're your last relatives and I believe that it is safer for you in Muggle World." Dumbledore answered.

"I'd have been safer if you had placed me with Lord Greengrass or Lady Bones. Why my relatives?" Harry asked again.

"They can offer you protection that no other family can. You have to trust me on this and continue to live with the Dursleys until you turn seventeen. It's the reason you are still alive today."

"I have to live with them until I turn seventeen?" Harry echoed.

He might be talking about blood protection. Didn't you say that your Mum died while protecting you? He might've placed you in their custody to continue that protection. Hermione said. I will have to do some research on that. Maybe we should visit Edmund soon.

So he's trying to protect me from Tom? I've gone up against him twice already. Even though he's been reduced to a less than human state, he's still a threat. Harry returned.

It may have protected you from Tom, but it did nothing to protect you from your family abusing you for so many years. Hermione replied. The fact that he neglected you after placing you with the Dursleys makes him partially responsible.

Yes, it doesn't justify anything. Harry thought.

"You do know what they did to me, don't you?" Harry asked.

"Yes, I've heard about it. I didn't know things were that bad at your relative's house. I'm sorry, but it was necessary for me to help buy you a few more years." Dumbledore answered tiredly.

"Why didn't you allow Lord Greengrass or Lady Bones to visit? They would have made sure that things would be different!" Harry asked sharply.

"People might have traced them. It's common knowledge that they are close to the Potters. Many people would've wanted to know your location. It was for the greater good."

Harry grew silent as he tried to control his temper. "Your apologies don't mean anything to me, Headmaster. If I didn't have Hermione in my life, I can't imagine how I'd go on. In any event, I'm not sure about going back to the Dursleys. If it's the only way to stave off the inevitable, I might consider it." He declared stonily. "This doesn't mean that I trust you. I'll no longer do anything just because you've told me to - I'll do as I see fit. I have lessons soon, so I will bid you good day, Headmaster." Harry strode out of the office swiftly.

Fawkes was staring at Dumbledore with disappointment. Without a sound, the phoenix spread his large wings and took off, leaving the Headmaster to consider Harry's words.

Rita Skeeter was chewing on her obnoxious pen as she pieced the information she'd gathered in her office.

She'd always thought that there was more about the Leader of the Light that most people didn't know. After all, one's character was never truly perfect – not even the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards. The useful tip that an anonymous person had given her a few days ago was proving to be very useful and she began to look in the right direction.

She was duly rewarded when she found some documents that Albus Dumbledore had insisted on preventing Sirius Black, one of the members of the Order of the Phoenix, from having a trial. After much researching on the man, she got an idea about Dumbledore's motives. The reason became crystal clear with the publishing of the Weasleys' apology.

I wonder what people would say if they discovered that Dumbledore placed Sirius Black in Azkaban so that he could gain custody of the Boy-Who-Lived, making the boy completely dependent on him? There was an ugly smile on her face as she began to pen the article that would make her indisputably rich.

"Are you really going to go back to your relatives when our third year ends?" Hermione asked as she looked at Harry with concern. They were lying on their bed, reading. "Why don't we run the idea by Elissa and Edmund? We can verify if there is still a need to continue the blood protection this way. After all, we've married and are considered adults in the Wizarding World."

"If I really need to, then I will. It will be fine – I won't have to stay the whole summer, just like this past summer when I got to spend most of it with you, Mum, and Dad." Harry replied before a mischievous grin came across his face. "I have you and the rest to count on, as well. Besides, I can protect myself with magic. I am not planning on staying anywhere without you."

"I wasn't planning on letting you do that, either." Hermione said. "Did you check the items on your desk? Dad and Mum sent us pictures from my birthday party." She smiled as she took a photo album from the side table. She handed him the album so he could look at the latest pictures. Harry was surprised to find out that they were able to take pictures at Potter Manor.

"They were using a digital camera, weren't they?" Harry asked as he continued to look at the photographs.

"Why yes," Hermione answered, unsure of why he was asking.

“Don’t most Muggle devices fail to work in the Magical World?” He asked. Her eyes shone with excitement when his meaning dawned on her.

“We can have muggle inventions at the Manor, then! I think the area where we had our party was quite a distance from the main building.” She spoke animatedly. “We could have the movie theatre you’ve always wanted.”

“And you parents will feel more comfortable living there if we could build a separate structure for Muggles.” He smiled warmly. “We need to make some slight adjustments on the wards that are built around the property so that we can engage a construction company to build a house.”

Hermione chuckled at his exhilaration. “Aren’t we supposed to talk to Edmund about blood protection?” She teased him about the change in topic. “Besides, we could build a house with magic; we just can’t have anything that uses magic in that house.”

“How about supplying the place with electricity? It’s a problem.” Harry pointed out. “As for meeting with Edmund – well, that can wait until the morning.”

“So can the planning of the building and adjustment of the wards. It’s way too late in the evening to do that.” Hermione countered.

Harry grinned. “Yes, my love, everything can wait until the morning. Let’s go to sleep.” Hermione snuggled close to him as he turned off the lights magically.

A/N: Sorry for the late update of the chapter. Thank you for all reviews! There was several technical difficulties, in addition to my abnormally busy week. The Weasleys will fade into oblivion after this. I would love to hear from you as usual. Please feel free to comment. Have a great week! Till next chapter.

Chapter 18

Beta- read by frustr8dwriter

Dumbledore Sentenced Black to Azkaban to Gain Custody of Boy-Who-Lived

By Rita Skeeter

Albus Dumbledore was found to be the mastermind behind the plan that sentenced the innocent Lord Sirius Black, current Head of the Noble and Most Ancient House of the Black, to an indefinite stay in Azkaban without benefit of a trial twelve years ago.

According to Lord Black's case file, the reason noted by the then newly elected Head of Wizengamot, Dumbledore, was that Lord Black's presence at the scene of the crime was sufficient evidence to prove his guilt. He sentenced him to a lifetime in Azkaban on the charges of murdering thirteen people in broad daylight. This move was unprecedented even during those dark times. After all, well-known Death Eaters like Bellatrix Lestrange, who committed endless numbers of murders, were tried before they were sentenced, raising questions about Dumbledore's motives when it came to the imprisonment of Sirius Black.

Lord Black is the Godfather of Harry Potter, Lord Gryffindor, Head of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Potter. He was to take custody of Lord Gryffindor per Lily and James Potter, and his was the only name stated in their will. According to the laws, in the event that the appointed Guardian was unable to perform his or her role, custody of the child passes to his or her closest living relatives. If the child's living relatives happen to be Muggles, the Headmaster of the school that the child in question will be attending in the future would be made the Magical Guardian. Dumbledore, by using his new political power to sentence Lord Black to Azkaban, took the Magical custody of the Boy-Who-Lived, as his future Headmaster and the Leader of Light.

It was clear that Dumbledore wished to have Lord Gryffindor under his control when he abused his position as his Magical Guardian to deny the Heads of the Ancient and Noble Houses the opportunity to

visit young Lord Gryffindor while he was living with his abusive Muggle relatives. He had also used his influences to prevent the two other Heads of the Ancient and Noble Family to fight for the custody of Lord Gryffindor many years ago. According to an unnamed source who witnessed most of Lord Gryffindor's childhood, the young Lord was constantly physically and verbally abused by his Uncle and Aunt and was made to do hard labour like a house elf. Despite being informed of the mistreatment that Lord Gryffindor was suffering through, Dumbledore allowed the abuse to go unchecked so that the young man would grow to be dependent on him. His wish to have the Magical World's saviour completely under his control was reaffirmed when news of Dumbledore sending a student to spy on Lord Gryffindor was made known.

When contacted for comment, Dumbledore denied all charges. He stated he was aware of the hard labour that Lord Gryffindor had been doing but he claimed that it was normal for middle class Muggles to do that type work at home. He also claimed that it was necessary for Lord Gryffindor to remain in his sphere of influence for the 'Greater Good'. One must then question how we could place the future of our society in the hands of a man like Albus Dumbledore, who could neglect the well-being of his charges for his ideals.

The Four Ancient Houses would no doubt looked into his miscarriage of justice in Dumbledore's office, his serious violation of power when he held the office and his gross neglect of Lord Gryffindor when he was still in his custody.

The Interim Head of Wizengamot, Lord Sirius Black promised to look into this serious breach of power by the previous Head and rectify the problems that allowed such abuse. Investigations are expected to commence soon.

For more information on the charges that Lord Black was wrongly sentenced for, turn to page 2.

For more information on Albus Dumbledore, turn to page 3.

For more information on the conditions that Lord Gryffindor lived in, turn to page 4.

The fallout of that article was unexpected. Lord Greengrass did not count on Sirius' sympathisers to rally in response to the article. Most of them were disgusted that Dumbledore had used the system for his own benefit. With that incident fresh in everyone's minds, the public pressure demanding that Dumbledore be brought to justice for his gross misuse of his position as Head of the Wizengamot and Magical Guardian mounted to unparalleled height. It did not help that a majority felt betrayed that the man they had entrusted with many of Magical Britain's responsibilities had abused his position of power and influence. The Society was also appalled that Lord Gryffindor, the Saviour of the Wizarding World, grew up with abusive relatives - adding fuel to the fire.

The entire Wizengamot responded to the public outcry by gathering together that very afternoon the newspaper was published to begin a thorough investigation into the allegations against the former Head, which included corruption. The disgraced Headmaster was going to be cross-examined within two days of the investigation's completion. It was already evident that this was going to become one of the Magical World's most highly anticipated trials.

Harry Potter's jaw tightened visibly - the only change in his expression when he first read the article. After finishing it, he let out a sigh as he set his copy of Daily Prophet on the wooden table. He was a deeply private person and did not like knowing that the full story of his maltreatment was reported in the newspaper. He was sure that it would stir up some reaction from the society. "I wonder who provided the information about my life at the Dursleys. You don't think Uncle Os would've told the Prophet, would you?" Harry muttered out loud.

His statement had caught Hermione's attentions. "No, I don't think he would've gone that far. He knows that part of your life is intensely personal. This journalist, Rita Skeeter might've found out more somehow. According to Aunt Am, she's really good at unearthing information and she doesn't care about the consequences of her articles. Half the time, she's sprouting half-truths, but her writing has a lot of power. She might have found the person that was supposed to keep an eye on you." Hermione suggested as she took his copy and began scanning through the article.

“I would have to agree with Hermione. Skeeter is an unscrupulous journalist who would resort to anything to get the best scoop.” Daphne interjected.

“Is there any wonder why Uncle Os give her the scoop? I can’t believe she worked so fast, it’s been barely a week since he tipped her.” Harry answered as he shook his head.

Soon, he was distracted. His curiosity was piqued when he noticed a group of owls carrying a long thin parcel flying towards them. It was like Déjà vu of his first year when he had received his Nimbus 2000. To his surprise, the group of barn owls dropped the parcel in front of Harry, toppling the goblets of pumpkin juice on the table in the process. Harry, Hermione, and Daphne hurriedly righted the fallen cups and cleared the mess on the table with cleaning spells. The parcel looked suspiciously like a broomstick so he picked up the note that came with the parcel.

“What’d you get?” The Weasley twins asked excitedly as they scrambled over to get a look at the parcel. Cedric, who was walking by the Gryffindor table, joined them.

“I don’t know yet. There’s a note attached, though.” Harry said as he read it.

Hi Harry,

I hope that you’ll be glad with this selection. Consider it as a belated birthday present from me. Hope both you and Hermione are well.

Love,

Sirius

A belated birthday present from Sirius? He thought as he looked at the parcel. With a thrilled smile plastered on his face, he tore the brown wrapping paper surrounding his gift.

He could not believe his eyes when he saw what Sirius had sent.

“Wow, it’s a Firebolt - an international standard broom!” One of the twins announced reverently as they beheld the magnificent, gleaming new broomstick.

Its handle glittered as he picked it up. He could feel it vibrating, and when he let it go, it hung in mid-air, completely unsupported, at exactly the right height for him to mount it. His eyes moved from the golden registration number at the top of the handle, past his name “Harry Potter” in shiny golden letters, right down to the perfectly smooth, streamlined birch twigs that made up the tail. He ran his hand across the broom, in awe of his gift.

“Wow,” said Harry hoarsely. He was speechless. “How did he know that I needed a new broom?” He wondered as he looked at his wife for some answers. At that moment, she seemed way too preoccupied with her book. Without a doubt in his mind, he knew that she must have had a hand in it. He set the broom down carefully, cupped her face suddenly, and kissed her passionately on the lips.

Her face reddened when the sound of catcalls and applause erupted because of their public display of affection.

Harry, on the other hand, was so happy that he was unaffected by it.

“Thank you, Hermione,” whispered Harry. His smile was infectious and it made Hermione beam back in amusement.

“I have no idea why you’re thanking me. I didn’t exactly choose the broom or pay for it.”

“Yes, but you told Sirius though, didn’t you?” Harry answered. “I know that you have no experience buying a broomstick, so you asked Sirius for help. However, he decided to buy the broomstick instead

and give it to me as a birthday present.” He guessed as he smiled as he placed an arm around her shoulders.

She neither confirmed nor denied his claims but Harry knew that he was right.

Many gathered around to view his gift. They were all in awe of his new broomstick. A huge smile split Wood’s face when he learned that Harry would be using an international standard broomstick. “We’re going to win that Quidditch cup for sure.” He said to one of his friends as he walked off.

“I just can’t believe it...” One of the twins began as he stared at their captain’s retreating back.

“...He’s just seen a Firebolt and all he can think of is our team winning the cup?” The other continued incredulously.

“He’s really barking mad.” They concluded together, much to the amusement of Harry and the rest of the team.

“He can’t think about anything but victory,” Katie Bell announced as she sighed. “Thank Merlin that our next match is several months away. We’ll be playing against Ravenclaw, just before we break for Christmas.” She continued.

“Ravenclaw?” Harry repeated as he looked at her. “How are they doing this year?” He asked.

“Not too bad, I suppose.” She answered. “It turns out that Cho Chang is a great Quidditch Captain. They aren’t going to pose any real problems but knowing Wood, he’s going to work our butts off.” She sighed again.

After breakfast, Harry headed back to his quarters to put the broomstick away and send a note to Sirius expressing his gratitude. Neville, who was involved in a project to help Madam Sprout with caring for the plants, took off to the greenhouses so that he could check on his precious flora. Susan and Luna went to the Library so

that Susan could tutor Luna on Charms. Cedric was already out at the pitch, training his team for the upcoming match against the Slytherin, leaving only Hermione and Daphne at the table.

The hall began to empty as the rest of the students flocked outside to enjoy some sun. Hermione and Daphne used the opportunity to have a little girl talk.

“What’s up with you and Cedric?” Hermione asked curiously. “You’re still making him really uncomfortable.”

Daphne was emotionless as usual. “Am I? That’s the way I usually treat guys.” She answered nonchalantly, her reply completely befitting an Ice Queen.

Hermione’s forehead crinkled at her response. “So what do you think Harry, Neville, or the Weasley twins are? Girls?”

She grew contemplative for a moment, “How about ‘genderless’? I mean sure, Harry, Neville, Fred and George are guys but I don’t see them like that. It’s not as if they see me as a girl, either. Harry hasn’t noticed that I’m a girl since the first time I’ve met him. Neville, Fred and George hardly notice – they treat me like one of the guys especially when we talk. It’s not surprising that I don’t notice their gender too.”

“I think I get the point. However, you’re totally aware of Cedric’s gender and it makes you treat him coldly?” Hermione questioned pointedly. She had a feeling there was mutual attraction between the two and that was the root of all the tension.

“No, it’s the other way round. He’s very conscious of me, hence the treatment.” Daphne insisted.

“I supposed that’s true - I mean what other teenaged male in this school hasn’t noticed that you’re an attractive girl?” Hermione continued. Daphne merely arched her eyebrows in surprise. “Scratch that question. My point is that it’s difficult for him ignore that you’re a

girl and a gorgeous one to boot. Are you going to continue to ignore him as long as he's infatuated with you?"

"Yes," Daphne answered. "Why would I want to encourage him?"

Hermione pinched her nose at her response as she tried to think of a better way of putting things. "Well, this whole situation will make things awkward." Hermione decided finally. "After all, he does sit with us occasionally."

"Then does it really matter?" Daphne asked. "It's not as if he's here with us every day."

Hermione became speechless for a moment then threw up her hands in surrender, much to the amusement of her friend.

"Relax, Hermione. Don't tear your hair out over such minor things." Daphne answered as she smiled brightly. "Maybe I should be asking you what's going on with you and Cedric. You seem way too concerned about him." Her voice took on a more mysterious, yet obviously teasing tone. "Harry may be my friend, but I can keep a secret."

Hermione rolled her eyes in response.

"Don't be silly. You know we're just friends." Hermione answered flatly. "And if that's your way of trying to change the subject, it's not working." She added. "I only brought it up because I noticed everyone's discomfort whenever you snub him."

She chuckled at Hermione's reaction to her words. "It seems that I can't wiggle out of this, can I? I will work something out with Cedric, I promise." Daphne replied.

"You want me to trust the words of a Slytherin?" Hermione asked in faux surprise.

“I’m a pseudo- Gryffindor, remember?” She laughed. “I’ll speak to him after his practice. Anyway, how are you feeling? Is what I read true?” Daphne questioned.

“What are you referring to exactly? Harry’s awful childhood?” Hermione asked before sighing. “I wish I could say that it wasn’t true. Anyway, I can’t believe that Dumbledore had the cheek to say that it’s normal for middle class Muggles to do hard labour at home. We do maintain our houses ourselves but Harry has to do everything! I actually just learned how bad it was for him over summer holidays. He really didn’t want others to know about it.”

“Now that Skeeter’s uncovered it, I’m sure that there’ll be a lot more coverage on him. This whole thing is so unbelievable - Harry’s such a kind person. It’s impossible to imagine that he lived in such horrible conditions and that his relatives would treat him so terribly. I guess Uncle Sirius ‘s gift came just in time to take his mind off things.”

“Yes, his gift definitely did. I’m determined to make sure that the Dursleys get what’s coming to them but I’m afraid we can’t – at least not yet. Harry has to return to that place for part of his summer holidays. I’ve done some research and there’s no way around it. If you remember what Harry looked like when he first came into Hogwarts, you’ll have some idea of what we’re facing. Harry showed us a snippet of his life. Believe me, it wasn’t pleasant.” Hermione returned.

She had discussed their options with Harry after they met with Edmund. Edmund had agreed that Harry needed to stay with the Dursleys if he wanted to prolong his mother’s protection. Edmund pointed out that Harry was no longer in danger of being abused by his relatives because he’d be able to defend himself magically. Harry and Hermione decided that Harry still needed the protection and thus would have to stay at the Dursleys. Their decision to return to for at least part of their summer holidays meant that the other Heads could not punished the Dursleys the way they wanted.

“It’s sad that you can’t make them pay by subjecting them to Wizard laws anytime soon.” Daphne commented dejectedly. “Hmm, I wonder

if Dementors affect Muggles the same way they do us..." She trailed off.

She suddenly grinned mischievously. "Wait a minute; you can always make them pay while you are living with them. With your status, it will be even easier to make their lives miserable. By the way, you better inform the Heads of your decision."

Harry, can you please remember to include our decision to stay with the Dursleys for part of the summer and our reasons why in your letter to Sirius? Hermione thought.

That slipped my mind completely. Thank you for the reminder, sweetheart. I'll add that to my letter right now. Harry answered.

"Thanks you for pointing that out, Daph." Hermione said sincerely as she returned to her conversation with Daphne. "On a different note, do you think it's possible to build a new entry point from the Muggle World to the Magical World?"

Daphne chewed over her answer. "I'm sure it's possible. They did it with the Leaky Cauldron – and there are other entrances like that throughout Magical World. Since no one would consider formally bridging the Muggle and Magical worlds because of the immense pride of the Wizards, there are no laws governing the building of private entrances. However, you must abide by the fundamental law of the Wizarding world – you must keep it a secret from the Muggles. Otherwise, you're safe to do as you please."

Hermione brightened at her answer. "That's great. I can start working on my plan." She smiled.

"You're going to build a private entrance?" Daphne asked in astonishment.

"Yes," Hermione replied. "We've been thinking of getting a place where we can have our Muggle entertainment like a home theatre. Unfortunately, there is no electricity in the Magical World and the devices run on it. So I was thinking along the lines of either building

or finding a place in the Muggle world that we can connect to the Potter Mansion magically so that it can become an extension to the house.” Hermione explained. “We were thinking of buying the place near my parents’ house.”

Daphne chuckled. “It sounds like an excellent idea. That way the two of you could remain in close proximity to them yet you’d still have your own private space.”

“So now, we just need to buy the house and start building the gateway to the Potter Mansion.” Hermione grinned happily.

True to her promise, Daphne was waiting patiently for Cedric at the Quidditch Pitch when his training session was over. He spotted the third-year Slytherin the moment she entered the stands and wondered what she was doing there. He then realised that he was not the only one who noticed her when two of his male teammates crashed onto each other because they were too busy staring at her. The impact of the collision did not hurt them but Cedric was tickled by the sight. He had to bite back the laughter that was erupting from him. He cleared his throat and assumed an authoritative tone befitting a captain. He shouted, “Good practice, everyone. Remember to stay focused when you’re flying. That’s all for today – you may return to the ground and head back to the changing room to shower. See you all later.”

One by one, every single Hufflepuff Quidditch player touched down and headed for the changing room. Cedric flew straight to the stand where Daphne was sitting and landed neatly next to her.

“Hi, Daphne.” He greeted with a warm smile.

The stunning blonde turned her head to look at him. “Good evening, Dig-Cedric.” She answered cordially. There was no hint of dislike in her clear blue eyes when she looked at him. His beam widened. He took an eager step towards her but halted after that.

Daphne raised her eyebrows in mild astonishment at his hesitance.

“I assume you want to have a word with me. Would you prefer to wait until after I’ve showered?” He asked as he kept his distance. He knew that he stank.

“Oh yes, please go and have your shower. I’ll wait for you.” Daphne replied as she turned to look at him.

To her amusement, his smile grew even wider. “I’ll be back soon.” He answered excitedly as he mounted his broom with grace that was unusual for someone so tall and sped off in the direction of the changing room.

Daphne chuckled at his child-like reaction. Observing the way he conducted Quidditch practice was an eye-opener for her. He was certainly more than just the looker she’d always thought him to be. The way he interacted and led the team with ease, showed his leadership abilities. It was evident that everybody on the team respected him. Opening the book she’d brought along with her, she began to read. It was only twenty minutes later when she heard footsteps approaching her. Looking up, she saw Cedric, looking more handsome than ever with his wet brown hair slicked back on his head, jogging towards her. He was only dressed in his white shirt and black school trousers. The top three buttons of his shirt was unbuttoned, revealing some of his lean body. Daphne was certain that her heart had skipped a beat so she hurriedly averted her eyes from him.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting.” He answered as he sat next to her. “What did you want to talk about?” Cedric questioned as he buttoned his shirt and put on his vest.

“Hermione pointed out that I was treating you badly. I don’t agree because this is the way I treat all you guys, but it seems to bother them. She wants us to work things out.” She explained emotionlessly as she shrugged.

He was rubbing the back of his neck with one of his hands as he looked at her with a sheepish expression. “My bad, I suppose?” He answered with a lopsided grin. He was happy to know that she really didn’t have anything against him.

Daphne turned away from him, annoyed that his boyish charm could get to her that easily. “Naturally, it’d be different if you didn’t stare at me all the time.” She retorted stiffly. Cedric laughed in response, earning a dirty look from her. It didn’t seem to dampen his spirits.

“I’m sorry.” He apologised earnestly. Her stare softened a little from the sincerity of his apology. “You must know that you have that effect on guys.” He continued in a light tone. His brown eyes twinkled, reflecting the mirth he felt. “But I also know that I’m not the only one who looks at you that way. Why are you so unnerved by me?” His direct question took Daphne by surprise; it was moments later when she rolled her eyes exaggeratedly.

“No, I’m not.-” She insisted.

He was about to call her a bluff when she continued.

“Okay, I just don’t like to be stared at like I’m an object.” Daphne answered gruffly. She noticed that he had turned away from her, no doubt hiding his amusement. “Hey, what’s so funny?” She demanded coolly.

“I thought you’d be used to that by now. After all, you are a scion of an Ancient House.” He explained as he turned around to look at her. “Besides, it must be quite entertaining at times. Two of my teammates collided in mid-air when they saw you enter the pitch. I’m sure that there have been many unfortunate guys who have crashed into pillars as you walked past them along the corridors.”

She looked at him with a blank expression on her face.

“ You mean you didn’t notice what happened?” He asked incredulously as he laughed. “It was funny. Well, it wouldn’t have been quite as funny if they’d gotten hurt, but they weren’t.” He answered. “Have you seen guys walking into walls because they were staring at you?”

“Far too many times.” She answered as she desperately kept her face straight. It made him laugh. “It’s obvious that most of you don’t think with your brains.” She scoffed as she looked at the empty pitch.

“I thought Hermione asked you to make peace with me? This whole thing won’t be resolve if you keep up that haughty tone, Daphne.” He added in a mock sombre tone. His tone caught her attention. She was relieved when she saw the playful twinkle in his eyes. “How about this? We forget our initial impressions of each other and properly introduce ourselves as if it’s the first time we’ve met. This time around we’ll spend time getting to know each other. You’ll realise that I’m more than a brainless admirer.” Cedric suggested.

With wide smile plastered on his face, he stood up and introduced himself. “Hi, I’m Cedric Diggory.” He extended his hand, offering his friendship.

Daphne met his eyes for a moment. She gracefully stood up and grasped his large hand. If she cared to admit it, she would’ve realised that their hands fit perfectly together.

“Hi, I’m Daphne Greengrass. It’s nice to meet you.” She answered pleasantly. To her surprise, he lifted her hand to his lips and brushed his lips across her knuckles like a gentleman before releasing her hand.

“It’s my pleasure to meet you.” He returned as he did a curt bow. In an afterthought, he added teasingly, “Princess.”

She rolled her eyes in mock annoyance but a smile had cracked the mask. “That’s not helping to make new impressions, Cedric.” She sat down and encouraged him to do the same. She decided to make a concentrated effort not to be so cold to him. “What made you decide to join Harry’s group?” She inquired.

“There wasn’t a specific reason, exactly. I mean, Harry’s a great guy and Hermione is really nice too. We get along well and I admire his courage in bridging gap between the houses. Besides, from what I’ve seen, he doesn’t put on any airs, he’s accepting of people, and it’s

just nice to be around him.” Cedric answered thoughtfully. “So what about you - how did you meet him? Why did you decide to become his friend?”

It was Daphne’s turn to be reflective. “We met each other because of our pets. Callan, my owl, has paired up with his familiar, Hedwig. I was really surprised by his candour. When I first met him, I noticed that he grew uncomfortable around me; I thought he was going to be another of those guys that professed their feelings for me without knowing anything about me. Imagine my surprise when he told me that it was basically just a hormonal reaction and that he was very happily in love with Hermione. We’ve got along well ever since. After all, we share a love for pets. It doesn’t hurt that our families have a long-standing pact, either.” She summarised.

Cedric cackled. “I’ve noticed that you get unusually perked up when someone talks to you about your pets. I hope to have a chance to meet them sometime.” He said sincerely. He was glad that she was making an effort to talk to him amicably. Daphne and Cedric continued taking turns asking each other questions.

Neville was glad that the entire afternoon was well-spent. He used the day to re-pot plants with Professor Sprout in the Greenhouse number four. He was drenched with perspiration and covered with dirt when he entered the Gryffindor common room. He was surprised to see Luna waiting for him. “Hi, Neville. The Gremles told me that you were on your way up. Did you have a fun time at the Greenhouse?” She questioned as she trained her eyes on him.

“Hi Luna, yes I did. We managed to transfer all the seedlings into new pots.” Neville replied as he grinned broadly. “Where are the rest?” He asked.

“Susan is spending time with Hannah today.” She replied. “Daphne is with Cedric, and Hermione is with Harry.” She answered dreamily.

“Daphne and Cedric? Are you sure they’ll be okay alone?” He asked out of concern for them.

“They will be if the Nargles have ceased bothering Daphne- she’s deluding herself as a result.” Daphne added dreamily.

Neville smiled warmly. “I sure hope you’re right. It’s been a bit uncomfortable being around with them when Daph’s treating him so coldly. Anyway, let me head up for a shower first. Afterwards, you can tell me what you want to do later.” Neville answered as he jogged upstairs.

“I love you too, Daddy and Mummy. Drop me a message on my watch if you have any updates.” She told her parents as she stroked Crookshanks in a rhythmic motion. He’d fallen asleep in her arms. She was communicating with her parents via the communication mirror in the study. Jean and Dan said their good-byes before their faces disappeared from the screen. She realized when she ended the conversation that it was already evening. She smiled when she saw Crookshanks sleeping peacefully in her arms. Hermione made up her mind to look for Harry. When she stepped out of the study, she was gobsmacked to see a dining table full of food. Harry appeared placing more dishes of food on the nearly filled table.

“Are you planning to feed ten people, sweetheart?” She questioned in amusement as she watched Harry grin back at her. He could sense that she was very touched by his effort to prepare a meal for her.

“Not exactly, I’m just wanted to make sure that my wife is well-fed. I remembered that you made me the best breakfast for my birthday. I didn’t have the chance to prepare a meal for you on your birthday, so I wanted to make it up to you.” He smiled warmly. He drew out the chair for his wife and Hermione tenderly tucked Crookshanks into his basket before sitting down.

“Thanks. You know you didn’t have to. My culinary skills aren’t excellent.” Hermione continued as she picked up her cutlery. The food looked scrumptious. She excitedly tucked in after Harry sat down.

“I guess that talking to your parents and Daphne worked up your appetite?” He questioned.

“Wow, this is really tasty, darling.” Hermione complimented after taking a bite. “You can really cook. Back to your question, not really. Daph nearly exasperated me when we were talking earlier today.”

“I’m not surprised. I’ll bet she was doing it on purpose.” Harry smiled as he ate his food. He noted the improvements he had to make to the next time he cooked a meal.

“I’m sure she was. We had an interesting conversation on genders, too. She thinks that you, Neville, Fred, and George are ‘genderless’.” She laughed.

“Well, I feel hurt that I’m neither here nor there.”

Pearls of tinkling laughter escaped Hermione. “Stop being so dramatic. This is the only way to have Daphne get on good terms with you. Apparently, she gives guys the cold treatment.”

“Why can’t she just say that we’re like her brothers or platonic friends?” Harry said as he shook his head.

“That’s Daphne Greengrass for you. Come to think of it, what she says has some truth in it. When I speak to Neville, Fred, George, and Cedric, I’ve never pay attention to their gender. They are just my friends.” She said thoughtfully as she chewed her food.

Harry recognised her ‘thinking’ look and laughed.

“We have an interesting circle of friends, don’t we?” Harry pointed out as he speared his food with his fork. “I thought you just spoke to Dad and Mum yesterday. Was there something pressing you needed to speak to them about?” Harry said enquiringly.

“Well, do you remember your idea of building a place to store Muggle entertainment?” She asked. He nodded his head. “I’ve been thinking about it and I’ve come up with a solution. We can buy a Muggle house and link it to the Potter Mansion. Dad told me that his

neighbour wants to sell his house. I was thinking that we should buy it.” Hermione explained.

Harry pondered over her idea. “It’s a good idea. That way we can become neighbours. Mum and Dad can escape to Potter Mansion easily if they needed to take cover. How are you going to link the two houses together?” Harry asked.

“I was thinking along the lines of a creating a magical hallway to join the two houses, almost like the way the Leaky Cauldron joins the two worlds together.”Hermione explained.

“That’s a great plan. How are we going to get this property?”

“Dad thought it’d be better if he helped us purchase the property.” Hermione continued as she ate.

“Well, I’ll speak to Dad and Mum tomorrow to finalise the details. But for now, I just want to spend the rest of the evening with you.” Harry flashed a smile.

“I can see that you’ve painstakingly arranged everything.” She replied with a smirk as she looked around.

Mirth was reflected in his eyes when he responded, “It wasn’t difficult. Luna was anxious to spend time with Neville. They are getting along very well.” Harry answered. His tone changed slightly when he continued, “And I’m very anxious to spend more time alone with you.”

The corner of her lips lifted in an affectionate smile. “I am too.”

After dinner, the couple decided to take a quiet stroll around Black Lake. There was no need for words to fill in the silence as they walked along the edges of the lake, hand in hand, as they admired the scenery together.

Harry felt the serenity of the moment filling him. He felt relaxed, the result of the combination of a cool evening breeze and the presence of his wife.

He, no they needed this; Harry thought as he looked at his wife. There was a serene look on her face as she absently tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. The Headmaster's trial, which was to begin the next day, would no doubt shake up the world they lived in. It would be another hectic and busy week.

He cast his wandering thoughts away, longing to bask in the tranquil moment where only Hermione and he existed. He turned to her and lifted his free hand to her cheek.

His gesture caught her attention - she lifted her head and met his eyes.

Despite the dark, she could see the tenderness reflected in his eyes- it was something that continued to enthrall her. He, who knew no love when he was little, was capable of displaying so much love and affection.

"It's because of you." Harry whispered softly as he caressed her cheek.

Love surged through her.

I love you, she thought. It felt even more intimate than spoken words. She leaned closer to him. Standing on her toes, she kissed him lovingly on the lips. Their mouths fused together in a slow and invigorating kiss. Harry restrained himself, allowing Hermione to set the pace she desired. Hermione broke the kiss after a while and rested her head in her favourite spot – the crook between his neck and his shoulder. She sighed in contentment when he wrapped his arms around her possessively.

"We can go to Hogsmeade next weekend." Hermione spoke softly, breaking the silence. "I think it'll be an exciting outing."

"I've heard so much about it from the older students. It's also the only truly magical village in Britain." Harry answered as he placed an adoring kiss on her hair.

“We’ll be away from Hogwarts so the media will no doubt attempt to harass you since Skeeter’s uncovered your past.” Hermione predicted.

A frown marred his expression. “You’re probably right. I do hope Dumbledore strengthens the security around the castle so that the media can’t enter. It’ll be our first Hogsmeade outing. I don’t want anyone to spoil it.”

After a moment he went on, “By the way, I’ve informed Sirius in the letter of our decision to return to the Dursleys for a short while during the summer. I don’t think he’s going to react well to the news.”

“Harry, it doesn’t matter how they’ll react to it. What matters most is how you feel about the whole thing. Are you upset that they won’t be punished yet?” Hermione questioned as she lifted her head to look at him.

He considered this question seriously.

“I remember the summer before we started our second year. The Dursleys made me do all the chores at the house because they were upset that they couldn’t beat the magic out of me. They were terrified of me initially, because they thought that I could cast a spell on them if they did anything to me. Aunt Petunia tried to hit me hard with a soapy frying pan when she realised I was only making fun of Dudley by saying that I was practicing. It never crossed their mind that I would have used magic on them if I could. Anyway, they punished me whenever I mentioned any ‘abnormalities’ under their roof. Everything got worse when Uncle Vernon realised I wasn’t allowed to do underage magic. They locked me up in their hope of keeping me away from Hogwarts, feeding me with only morsels three times a day. I thought I was never going to make to the end of the summer.” He felt her arms tightened around his waist.

“I’ve sort of gotten used to the things they used to do to squash the ‘abnormalities’ out of me. I grew to be very adept in dodging blows after a while. My relatives have a medieval attitude to Magic,

something I can't really blame them since we guard the secrets of our world so well. Yet it doesn't justify their actions. They just didn't want to be burdened with me. I have no love for them, the same way they have no love for me. Yet, I don't want to hand them over to be judged by our laws, after all Aunt Petunia is my mother's last surviving kin. I guess I just really want to hear a heartfelt apology from them and be treated better. Of course, I wouldn't mind doing some pranking." Harry chuckled.

"Do you think they ever would?" Hermione questioned emotionally.

Harry thought about his relatives. "Apologise? No, they wouldn't. They hate me and refuse to learn about our world. It's impossible." Harry answered.

"As much as I would love to hex them into pieces for treating you this way, you can't declare that it's impossible until we've a go at it. We'll have the chance to try that when we return to your relative's place for summer holidays. We have non-Magical parents, you know? Not all Muggles have medieval attitude to Magic."

"We can do anything you wish, Mione, as long as it makes you feel better." Harry smiled. "Yes, Dad and Mum are wonderful." He answered as he stroked her hair. "There was only one person who could've made my life better at the Dursleys, but he did not do a thing." He answered in a hardened tone. "I'd like to see him punished for his part in what happened to me, especially if the article was true." Hermione had noticed the change of expression when he first saw the headline of the article and understood what he meant. "He'll have a lot of accounting to do for making Sirius go through hell to fulfil his own plans and denying me contact with Aunt Am and Uncle Os for his benefit."

Hermione released her hold on his waist and touched his face lovingly. "I know, sweetheart, but this isn't the time to think of him. It's about us. Let's go back to our quarters." She answered as she held his hand and led him towards the castle. He followed her willingly.

“We can see the Gremles this way?” Neville asked curiously as he sat next to Luna. They were sitting at a window with their legs dangling dangerously outside, in an isolated tower of Hogwarts. Luna was waiting patiently.

“Yes,” she answered calmly as she turned to look at him. “Most people don’t see them mainly because they are too busy to notice their surroundings. Besides, you can only interact with them if you believe you can.”

“Well, the fact that they told you about my parents makes it difficult not to believe their existence.” He beamed. Luna smiled warmly in return before turning to search the sky. Neville couldn’t help but notice how blue her eyes were despite the dark. There was a glow in her eyes as she searched the sky with great anticipation. Luna was really very pretty if anyone cared to look at her the way he was looking at her now. His thoughts were disrupted when she excitedly said, “There! Look over there!” She pointed.

He had to strain his eyes to see what she was pointing to. After a while, he noticed a glowing orange speck of dust. It did not look like the other stars. He took a closer look and realised that it was moving towards them.

It was no bigger than a beetle but it was glowing like a fairy. “Hello,” greeted Luna warmly. “This is my friend, Neville Longbottom.”

Neville, thinking it was impolite not to talk, said, “Hello.”

To his surprise, he heard a light voice. “Hi, Neville. I was wondering when I’d finally get to meet you.”

More Gremles soon joined them after a while, lighting the place up like strings of Christmas lights. It was a bizarre and strange encounter but Neville felt at ease sharing this special secret with Luna. It was a little past curfew when they crept back into the Gryffindor common room.

“Thanks for bringing me to see the Gremles,” Neville began as they stood in the middle of the two stairways.

“It’s my pleasure.” She smiled. “They like company.” She continued dreamily.

“I can see that.” Neville grinned as he rubbed the back of his neck nervously. “Good night, Luna. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He concluded with a smile.

“Goodnight, Neville.” She answered. They parted ways with beams plastered on their faces. They had no doubt that they would sleep more soundly that night.

It was the morning of the hearing. Harry took his mind off the matter by spending some time mediating with Neville after their run. The Weasley twins, Susan, Daphne, and Neville had decided to join them in their morning run around Black Lake. Since it was the Weasley twins’ first time on the run, they had to take it slowly. Harry did not even break a sweat after the run, so he volunteered to help Neville with his Occlumency lessons. A short while after, a letter from the Ministry found him, it was then that he discovered that he would have to attend the hearing too.

In a Courtroom in the dark dungeon under the Ministry of Magic, the highly anticipated court hearing was about to begin. All fifty members of the Wizengamot, wearing the usual plum-coloured robes with elaborately worked silver ‘W’ on the left hand side of their chest, sat in rows before the accused, Albus Dumbledore.

In the centre of the front row was Sirius Black. There was a grim expression on his face as he looked upon his former ally. He began to speak as soon the aged wizard sat down in his seat. Dumbledore was wearing a robe of midnight blue. He placed the tips of his long fingers together and looked back at him with a calm expression.

“The Hearing of fourteen of October into the offences committed under the Charter of Wizengamot and The Child Welfare Act of 1890 by Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, resident at Hogwarts

School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is now called to order.” Sirius began in a solemn voice. “Interrogators: Lord Sirius Orion Black, Chief Warlock of Wizengamot , Head of Noble and Most Ancient House of Black; Lady Amelia Susan Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Head of Noble and Most Ancient House of Bones. Court Scribe, Urs Carl Young.”

He extricated a piece of parchment from the pile in front of him, took a deep breath, and read out. “The charges against the accused as follows:

“That He did knowingly, deliberately, and in full awareness of the illegality of his actions, misused the powers invested by the Wizengamot by passing a sentence on innocent Sirius Orion Black without a trial on the First of November 1981 resulting in a miscarriage of justice which constitutes as an offence under paragraph B, Section 14 of the Charter of Wizengamot for abuse of power and another offence under paragraph H, Section 11 of the Charter of Wizengamot for miscarriage of justice. He also knowingly, deliberately and in full awareness of the illegality of his actions, neglected the welfare of Lord Harry James Potter, Head of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Potter since 1981 which constitutes as an offence under paragraph I, Section 22 of The Child Welfare Act of 1890.”

“You are Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry?” Sirius asked as he looked at the aged man before him.

“Yes, I am.” Dumbledore answered calmly as he looked over the Wizengamot.

Amelia nodded at Sirius when he looked at him.

“The Wizengamot and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement have given permission for the use of the Veritaserum in this trial.” Sirius said suddenly. One of the wizards brought out small bottle of the colourless potion to Dumbledore. His face registered fear for a moment – he did not expect that the Wizengamot would not trust him

to tell the whole truth. He guessed that since it involved the reputation of the Wizengamot, they would take any measure to ensure that he was convicted properly. He composed himself and took the bottle of colourless potion. He lifted the bottle in salute of the Wizengamot before downing the whole bottle. His blue eyes had turned glassy - the sign of the potion taking effect.

“Let it be noted that the Accused drank the potion willingly.” Sirius continued. The quill of the Court Scribe moved at rapid speed at his statement. He nodded at Amelia when she looked at him for instruction.

Amelia began firing her questions in regard to the first two counts of offences against the Wizengamot. “I’m sure that you are aware of Section 15 of the Charter of Wizengamot since you were the Chief Warlock when you wrote the order that sentenced Sirius Orion Black to a lifetime in Azkaban. Are you aware that all accused must be placed on trial before they are sentenced?”

“Yes, I am.” He answered emotionlessly.

“So you did it deliberately?” She asked curiously as she stared at her previous Headmaster.

“ Yes,” Dumbledore repeated. Some of the member of the Wizengamot gasped at his admission.

“When you did it, were you aware of his innocence?”

“Not really, but it didn’t matter. I passed a sentence based on the crimes he was accused of. I persuaded the others to sign the document.” He answered as he clasped his hands. Whispering among the members of Wizengamot had begun. Sirius shot a look at the rows of wizard sitting behind him and ordered them to be quiet.

“Why did you say that it didn’t really matter? Was it because you had another agenda? If so, what was your agenda?” Amelia questioned as she sat up straighter. It promised to be an intriguing answer.

“Yes. It was because I wanted the custody of Harry Potter. I knew that Sirius Black was made guardian of the child if Lily and James Potter died. Sirius Black had conveniently placed his life in my hands.” He answered emotionlessly.

The Wizengamot began to buzz at his statement.

Amelia Bones held herself back from asking the question that everyone wanted to ask since it was not relevant to the case. The statement was enough to convince the Wizengamot to charge him for the first and second count of offence. However, she knew that he could escape from being convicted for the second count of offence—deliberate actions which lead or contribute to a miscarriage of justice. She wanted to make sure he held liable for both counts so she questioned on.

“Did anyone assist you in sentencing Sirius Black without a trial?” She asked. Amelia expected a negative response but he gave an affirmative reply. There was a pregnant silence.

Her eyes widened in surprise.

“Who assisted you?” Amelia continued harshly.

“Cornelius Fudge, Cornelius Oswald Fudge, then junior Minister, and current Minister of Magic.” He answered promptly. The Wizengamot broke out in furious whispers. Sirius held his hand to silence them. There was a look of astonishment on his face.

“How did he assist you?”

“He placed his signature on the document that sentenced Lord Black to Azkaban. While the rest had did it unknowingly, he was convinced that Sirius Black did indeed commit those crimes because he was the first to arrive at scene.”

“It shall be written that a hearing will be set for Cornelius Oswald Fudge for committing an offence under paragraph E of the Charter of

Ministry of Magical Law Enforcement for abuse of power and another offence under paragraph H, Section 11 of the Charter of Wizengamot for miscarriage of justice.” Sirius commented. It was noted immediately.

He glanced at Dumbledore with masked distaste. “We will now move on to the third charge for the neglect of his charge Lord Harry James Potter.” He said. “Please ask Lord Harry James Potter into the room, Young.” He commanded. Urs leapt out of his seat and ran to fetch Lord Harry James Potter.

It was the first time Harry had been to the Ministry of the Magic. Uncle Oswald had taken the opportunity to accompany him down to the courtroom. Dressed in his black dress robes with the Gryffindor crest on his left pocket, he waited patiently for someone to retrieve him. A young man soon came out of the courtroom.

“Good afternoon, Lord Gryffindor. I’m Urs Young, the Court Scribe. I was asked to escort you in. This way please.” He said courteously as he led him in. Everyone had turned around to face him as he entered the courtroom.

There was a look of concern on Sirius’ face when laid his eyes on him. Harry gave him an assuring smile.

“For the record, please state your full name.” Sirius said in a gentle tone.

“I am Harry James Potter, Lord Gryffindor, and Head of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Potter.” He announced. Urs had thoughtfully conjured a large comfortable armchair for him and he thanked the scribe with a smile.

The Wizengamot gazed at him with great interest.

“Lord Gryffindor, you’re here to testify against Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore for the offence of neglecting you.” Sirius explained. “It is unlawful to provide false evidence in this Hearing. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I do.” Harry answered bravely.

Some of the members nodded in affirmation at the way he carried himself.

“To set the context of the charges, I need you to tell us, how your relatives, the Dursleys, generally treated you while you were living with them.” Sirius questioned in a kind tone. He knew it was bad to put Harry through it even though he was no longer in Dumbledore’s care, but he sensed that his godson needed a closure too.

Harry spoke. “The Dursleys didn’t treat me well. They were terrified of anything that associated with magic. They termed it an ‘abnormality’. They had always tried to stamp the magic in me by punishing me whenever I showed any signs of magic.”

“What kind of punishment have they meted out to you?” Amelia asked, seeing that Sirius looked so troubled.

“When I was younger, they usually beat me or locked me in the cupboard under the stairs for long periods of time without letting me out.” Harry answered.

“Not even to go to the toilet? Did they give you food?” She continued.

“No, not even to go to the toilet. They didn’t feed me during those periods.” Harry answered. The Wizengamot grew quiet at his answer.

“How long would those periods last?”

“A week or more? It’s really hard pay attention to time when you’re locked up in a small area with nothing but thin bedding.” Harry answered.

“What can be consider a normal day when you were eight?”

“I would wake up to prepare breakfast for everyone. I would then walk to school. I’d usually spend my time hiding so that my cousin and his friends couldn’t find me in their ‘Harry-hunt’. I’d have my lessons. After school, I’d head home to finish the housework.” Harry described.

“What happen if your cousin and your friends found you in their ‘Harry-hunt’?”

“They’d beat me up.” Harry replied simply.

“This happened through your growing years and no one stopped him? You didn’t have friends then?” Amelia asked in surprise.

“Well, no adults believed me. My cousin could do no wrong in my Aunt and Uncle’s eyes. Besides, they’ve convinced the other adults that I was a hopeless case. Yes, no parents would want their kids to associate with me even if the kids were brave enough to incur the wrath of my cousin.” Harry continued.

After just a few questions, Harry emotionlessly painted an ugly picture of a young boy, who was isolated from everyone because of his relatives and was constantly mistreated and abused simply because he had no parents to protect him. There were tears in the eyes of most of the members of the Wizengamot as Amelia continued questioning.

Even she found it difficult to interrogate him. With each question, her voice grew more distorted with pain.

The Headmaster had bowed his head in deep remorse when he heard how Harry had lived most of his life.

After two final questions, Amelia thought that it was enough. They couldn’t bear to hear any more details of his life.

“Lord Gryffindor, thank you for sharing with us. You may step down and wait on the side.” Sirius answered hoarsely, as he looked down

at Harry tenderly. Turning to face Dumbledore, he shot a glare so scorching that it terrified those who saw it.

“Were you aware that your charge, Lord Harry James Potter, was mistreated by his relatives, the Dursleys, while he was still staying with them from the year 1981 until the present?” He asked in flat tone.

With an emotional tone, he answered truthfully. “I-I didn’t make the connection that he was abused by his relatives. I always had the impression that Harry was like his father- mischievous, and that he got into a lot of trouble with his relatives for that trait. I never had the details of his punishment. After all, Harry is the son of his Aunt Petunia’s only sister - they could not have treated him too harshly. It was only recently, that I was made aware of his abuses by Lord Oswald Paul Greengrass and Minerva McGonagall.”

Before Sirius could fire another question at him, Dumbledore said in a deeply remorseful tone. “Before hearing the tale from Lord Gryffindor, I always thought that whatever I’ve done or haven’t done for him was in his best interest. I thought that by sending him to the Dursleys, I could buy him some time, especially since Voldemort wasn’t completely gone and some of his Death Eaters might want to end Harry’s life. I never thought of the danger he might face from his own family. I thought I was protecting him when I was keeping the Magical Society away from him. I’ve failed you, Harry. I didn’t mean to put you through hell. I’ve never did. I’m sorry.” Dumbledore concluded like a dejected old man.

With a harsh tone, Sirius continued with the questioning. “You never visited your charge during the years of 1981 to 1993? Do you know that you are held accountable for his welfare before the Wizarding Society because he is a Magical citizen?” Sirius demanded.

“Yes to both questions. The Dursleys, Harry’s surviving relatives, have a phobia to magic. I was afraid that my visit would terrify them and would make them dump Harry in an orphanage. Now I know I should’ve checked on him.” Dumbledore answered as he placed the tips of his fingers together and squeezed his eyes close. A single tear made its way down his cheek.

“Did you actually spend time getting to know the family you were placing your charge with?”

“No, Minerva McGonagall told me that they were the worst sort of people, but I reckoned that they won’t hurt their nephew.” Dumbledore continued, reverting back to the same emotionless tone.

“So you have never made certain of his welfare because of your assumptions that he would be treated well?”

“Yes.” He replied guiltily. He opened his eyes and looked at Sirius.

“As a result of your assumptions, Lord Harry James Potter was abused physically and emotionally for at least twelve years of his life?” Sirius barked in a loud voice. His black eyes were dark with anger as he glared at the aged wizard.

“Yes,” Dumbledore agreed as he lowered his head in shame. It was disconcerting for most to see the most powerful wizard of their time completely humbled.

“Did you stop the enquiry into his welfare by the two Heads of the Noble and Most Ancient Houses?” Sirius fired.

“Yes.” He continued.

“Did you stop the enquiry into his welfare by others so that Harry Potter would be completely dependent on you when he finally entered Hogwarts at the age of eleven?” He demanded in a voice distorted by suppressed rage. There was a collective intake of breath at his line of questioning. Everyone was anticipating Dumbledore’s answer.

“Yes,” He answered. Sirius was going to demand the reason for his actions but Amelia interrupted.

“You are willing to commit two offenses by sentencing Sirius Black to Azkaban without a trial, risking your reputation if someone

discovered what you've done to gain custody of Lord Harry James Potter, isolated him from the Magical Society by placing him in the Muggle world so that you could ensure that you'd be able to manipulate him, is that correct?"

"Yes," answered Dumbledore emotionally as he bowed his head. He had ceased to cry long ago, ever since the first war took his family away from him.

The entire Wizengamot fell into urgent and whispered conversation. After a while, Sirius cleared his voice, getting all of their attention.

"All those in favour of charging the accused with all three offences, raise your hands." Sirius said. Almost all of them had raised their hands in favour of charging him.

"All in favour of clearing all charges?" He questioned. None of them had raised their hands. "Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, you are hereby convicted with all three offences." He declared. "The hearing will be adjourned till the Wizengamot can compound your charges. Dismiss." Sirius concluded as he stood up and walked to the meeting room at the back of the courtroom. He was followed by every single member of the Wizengamot. The mental traps sprung up to strap Dumbledore onto his chair as two Aurors flanked his sides.

After a much heated discussion in the meeting room, they all decided on a suitable punishment for Albus Dumbledore. It was pointless to place him in Azkaban because it wouldn't serve any purpose. They decided that because of the contributions he's made to society in the past, his age, and his contrition, they placed him in a position where he could redeem himself.

The Wizengamot filed out of the meeting room into the courtroom. Sirius stood up to deliver the verdict. "The Wizengamot hereby charges you for all three offences. In light of your achievements, your age, and your attitude, we have sentenced you to 13 years of community involvement as a counsellor. You will help to tend to Magical children who come from abusive families. You are hereby stripped of all your positions within any organisation. You will also

serve both Lord Sirius Black and Lord Gryffindor for the next thirteen years. Each year, they will write a report on your performance and should you persist in manipulating their lives again, you will be sentenced to 13 years in Azkaban. This is a light punishment, taking account of all the offences you've committed. The Wizengamot has handed you this punishment to give you the opportunity to truly redeem yourself. There will be no second chances from this point." He concluded, looking at the aged Wizard.

"Thank you." Dumbledore answered as he bowed.

Harry thought it was better that Dumbledore was punished that way. He could effectively contribute to the society while he served his sentence. Lord Greengrass took him straight back to school after the hearing was adjourned so he could attend the rest of the day's lessons.

The Board of Governors immediately called for an emergency meeting upon hearing the results of the Hearing. They did not want the disgraced Headmaster to continue his term. Lady Bones had joined Lord Greengrass in the private sitting room.

"I believe that Dumbledore should stay at Hogwarts." Lord Greengrass said quietly. "As much as I would love to put him through living hell for what he has subjected Harry to, I believe it is beneficial for the society that he still remains in the school."

"Why, Os? Is there a particular reason?" Lady Bones questioned in bafflement.

"The tale of Tom's death is false. He's around somewhere, waiting to find a way to make a comeback. You know that Voldemort is terrified of Dumbledore. According to Harry, who met him during the first year, he only made his move when Dumbledore was away from Hogwarts. In other words, if Dumbledore leaves this place, there will be no one deterring Voldemort from attacking the place, if Harry is indeed his target. You know that he'd do it since he's already attempted to do one before, two years ago." Lord Greengrass

explained as he scratched his chin. "I hate to say that we have to keep him but it's the only choice."

"Do we really need to keep him here?" She questioned. "Can you entrust Daphne or Astoria to him after realising what kind of person he is? I know I can't entrust Susan to him. I can't hand over my niece to a person who cares too much about his 'greater good' without a thought about the well-being of his students. I agree the tactic is useful during war, but this is a teaching institute. I don't want him to have an influence on the children." Lady Bones argued.

"How about demoting him? He could always use that experience and knowledge to teach. We could propose that Professor McGonagall be promoted to Headmistress." He recommended.

"Promoting McGonagall? It's a good idea. She really cares for the students. So you're actually proposing a swap of positions?"

"Exactly, it would solve some of our problems. In the past, I wouldn't have thought it to good decision since she was under his thumb, but I think she's learned not to put too much trust in him. She refused to believe anything he said after the expose was published in the newspaper." He smiled as he stood up. "Let's propose it to the Board."

Lady Bones followed him to the larger room where the meeting of the Board of Governors was held.

"Good afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen." Lord Greengrass began, as he addressed the School Board. "I'm sure that everyone seated here is very concerned about the future of Hogwarts and is here to discuss the Headmaster. We can't deny that Headmaster Dumbledore is a great man from his accomplishments, despite recent news. However, we can all agree on one thing - he is no longer suitable to be the Headmaster of this institution. A headmaster must be able to pay attention to all the details of running the school, be absolutely dedicated to his duties, and most importantly care for the well-being of every single student that attends the school. He has proven that he unable to do that."

There were murmurs of agreement in the meeting room.

“Yet,” Lord Greengrass continued, “It would be a great loss for us if he doesn’t impart the wealth of his knowledge and abilities to future generations. He’s a powerful and experienced wizard; a rich resource for our children, so I propose that there be a change in positions. Professor McGonagall would be promoted to Headmistress while Dumbledore would be kept on staff. I’d like to know how you feel about this proposition.” Lord Greengrass concluded as he looked around.

“I agree that Professor McGonagall would be a suitable choice to lead the school. However, I am wary of having Dumbledore take a position in which he still held responsible for the well-being of the students. Professor McGonagall’s duties included being the Head of the Gryffindor House. We were wondering if such duty could be passed to a younger teacher.” One of them suggested.

He glanced at Lady Bones. “I believe the arrangement of staff in Hogwarts is up to the discretion of the Headmaster, or in this case, the new Headmistress. We should defer to her on that. Anyone else have an objection?” He posed the question to the room. He was greeted with silence.

Some of them had protested against his proposal after they had heard about what transpired at the hearing. However, they were soon convinced when he explained the need for Professor Dumbledore. He was needed to be there to aid in the transition of Headmasters, besides; he couldn’t spend a lot of time with the students because he still needed to serve his sentence.

“I just want to point out that the succeeding Headmaster would be ineffective if his predecessor is part of his staff.” Lucius Malfoy argued.

“It depends on how cooperative Headmaster Dumbledore will be, don’t you think?” Lord Greengrass shot back. “Perhaps, it’s time to ask for their opinion. Let’s invite Headmaster Dumbledore and

Professor McGonagall to come in so that we can discuss the options with them.” Lord Greengrass concluded as he sat in the seat.

The door opened to reveal the aged Headmaster walking sombrely into his room. Professor McGonagall was on his heels. They both took a seat at the table.

“The Board of Governors has agreed that in light of the recent events, you are no longer suitable to run a school.” Lord Greengrass stated as he coldly looked into Dumbledore’s eyes. The headmaster was unusually calm.

“We have a proposition. However, we would like to hear your opinions before we vote on it. We propose that you, Headmaster Dumbledore, step down from your post and become an ordinary teacher. Professor McGonagall will then take your place as Headmistress.” Lord Greengrass declared.

“It’s a good choice. Lady Bones must’ve told you that I can no longer accept any high positions. I wouldn’t mind serving as a Transfiguration teacher.” He answered with a smile. “I willing give up my position as Headmaster.”

Professor McGonagall was surprised.

“Let’s take this to a vote. All those in favour of Professor McGonagall as new Headmistress, raise your hands.” Lord Greengrass said. Everyone in the room raised their hand.

“Alright, Professor Minerva McGonagall, you are the new Headmistress of Hogwarts. I hope that you’ll elevate Hogwarts to a greater height.” Lord Greengrass answered as he shook her hand.

“Congratulations, Headmistress.” Dumbledore smiled at her as he offered his hand.

“Thanks, Albus for taking the role of teaching Transfiguration. You must understand that I must monitor you, but I think you’ll do a good job. Would you please excuse me, I need to see to the new

arrangement of the staff. I believe I'm in need of a new Head of Gryffindor." She added briskly as she excused herself and walked out of the room.

The meeting ended soon after that and Amelia went to look for the gamekeeper to tell him the good news. Hagrid was now a free man!

Lord Greengrass and Dumbledore were alone in the room.

"I think it's time you make good on your promise. Didn't you say that you'd punish me if you ever found out that Harry was mistreated while he was under my care?" Dumbledore asked.

"You've been punished by the law. Even though that isn't enough for me, but I look forward to you being reminded of what you've done every time you teach a student or counsel an abused child. You'll always remember that you once failed your charge. That, I suppose, will be enough for me unless you cross the line again. Well, Sirius and Harry might benefit from your service – although I don't know if Harry will even let you near him." He smirked before leaving. "Have fun starting from the bottom of the food chain again." Lord Greengrass said as a parting remark.

A/N: Thank you for all reviews. When I wrote the sentence metled out for Dumbledore, I knew it sounded too lenient on him. The idea of sending him to Azkaban wasn't appealing. Serving and being a slave to Harry and Sirius was my cup of tea. The fact that the life of Dumbledore is now in the hands of Harry and Sirius appealed me too. We all have different idea of justice and this is a nice week.

Chapter 19

Beta-read by frustr8dwriter

“Good afternoon Professor Vector, may I join your class?” Harry Potter asked politely as he stood at the door of the classroom. The young Arithmancy Professor turned away from the equation she was working on the blackboard to look at him. He could feel the eyes of everyone trained on him as he waited for her answer.

“We only have about ten more minutes until the end of this lesson, are you sure you don’t just want to take a break? I’m sure you’ve just rushed here from the Hearing. You can have an early dinner.” She suggested as she pointed to the outfit he was wearing - a formal dress robe with the Crest of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Potter.

Harry shrugged. “I’d rather catch whatever’s left of your lesson, Professor. I’m not exactly the best at Arithmancy. I hope you don’t mind my attire.” He answered. He could feel his wife’s stare, so he shot a brief side-glance at her. Hermione was watching him with concern written on her face.

I’m alright, honey. He said in their shared awareness.

You look a bit pale. She replied tersely. I would rather that you take the time off to rest.

I can’t believe that you’re actually encouraging me to skip my lessons, love. What about the rules? He teased playfully. His facial muscles relaxed and a genuine smile began to make itself known on his lips.

She rolled her eyes upwards. He didn’t miss the twinkling of her eyes when she exaggerated her annoyance with that gesture. He did not bother hiding that amused smile that was on his face. You know you’re a terrible liar, honey. Don’t worry, I’m doing fine. He answered with a pleased tone.

“I can excuse you for this lesson. Please come in and take a seat. You may open your book to page 124. We are discussing what methods we can use to solve this question.” Professor Vector replied as she returned her attention to the blackboard.

Harry strode into the classroom and sat in the only empty seat in the classroom. He fished out his thick text and began to listen as Professor Vector explained the theories behind solving the question. To his delight, he could hear Hermione’s brilliant mind rapidly at work, solving problem after problem without breaking. Harry was sure that she could feel his amusement but she ignored him and concentrated on her work like the perfect student she was.

Harry spent the last five minutes of his time writing the solutions of all the problems they had covered during the lesson and handed his work to his Professor. Elissa had seen to it that his handwriting could never be illegible even in haste. The young auburn-haired Professor nodded as she took his parchment. “You can check with Miss Granger regarding the extra work I’ve assigned both of you. It must be turned in by the next lesson.” She advised. Professor Vector, like their other Professors, was worried about them keeping in pace with the fifth-years.

“Yes, thank you, Professor, I will.” Harry answered with a smile.

“Hurry along; I think Miss Granger's getting impatient.” The stern teacher smiled as she pointed to the door. Hermione was standing in the doorway with her stylish dragon hide bag slung carelessly behind her as she looked impatiently at Harry. His grin broadened the moment their eyes met.

“Have a good evening, Professor.” He bade as he walked to the door. The moment he reached her side, Harry lovingly entwined their fingers together. Without breaking his stride, they fell into step with each other.

None of their close friends took Arithmancy with them since the class they were in was for fifth-year Gryffindors and Ravenclaws. This gave the young couple some time alone to talk.

“How are you really feeling, Harry?” She questioned with arched eyebrows.

“I’m really okay.” He assured with a smile. “Aunt Am tried her best to make the experience as easy as possible. Sirius was upset throughout the whole trial. He was a sight to behold, though. He really filled the role of Interim Chief Warlock of Wizengamot very well.” Harry went on.

He recognised where she was leading him. It looked like they weren’t heading down to the Dining hall for dinner just yet, but were making their way towards the Gryffindor tower instead.

“It must’ve been difficult, nonetheless.” She concluded pointedly as she studied his facial expression in great detail. The intensity of her gaze made him lift her hands and brush his lips across them lightly.

“Yes, it was hard not to be a bit unsettled when about fifty people are looking at you. Anyway, Dumbledore broke down.” Harry answered, as his eyes grew distant. He gathered his thoughts and continued, “He couldn’t lie since he was testifying under the influence of Veritaserum. The Wizengamot had no choice but to convict him after he admitted to all his manipulations and disregard for the law. He was punished in a way that will benefit plenty of families – he got 13 years probation, has to serve community service at a centre for abused children, and is stripped of any high-ranking positions he holds, including Headmaster of Hogwarts. He also has to serve both Sirius and me for thirteen years as well. On top of that, he has to come to terms with his fall from grace.”

“What did you think about his whole punishment?” Hermione probed.

“I’m pretty happy with their judgement. I wonder who’ll be our Head of House and our transfiguration teacher now that Professor McGonagall has been made Headmistress.” He inquired thoughtfully. They were coming to the entrance of the Gryffindor common room when they noticed a tall figure dressed in plum coloured robes pacing impatiently outside the Portrait of the Fat Lady. The person spun

around when he heard footsteps approaching him. Sirius Black's face had a look of relief at the sight of the two teenagers.

"Harry," He said hoarsely as he moved towards them. "Hi, Hermione" greeted Sirius.

"Hi Sirius," Harry and Hermione chorused in surprise.

"How are you?" He questioned as he trained his eyes on Harry. "I'm sorry that we had to put you through all of that. It must've been hard to talk about your life at the Dursleys." Sirius said emotionally. Harry waited patiently for his godfather to finish expressing his concern before he spoke.

"It was unnerving to speak to so many people about something so personal. Strangely, I felt lighter here -" He placed a hand on his heart to emphasize his meaning. "- as I spoke. I feel as if I've closed a chapter of my life properly. When I married Hermione, I was freed from the custody of my relatives and I knew my life would change. But was only at that moment, when I was recounting my past that I realised that the abuse was truly over and I could finally put it all behind me." He answered. He scrunched his face in confusion, "I don't know if that even makes sense, but that's how I feel."

"It's truly over. We'll never allow anything like that to happen to you again. Which reminds me of your decision in regard of your stay at your relatives – I don't think you should return there for your summer holidays." Sirius drew his eyebrows into a line.

"Sirius, I've already explained why I have to go back. Besides, Hermione will be with me and I can use magic to protect myself." He protested. "Anyway, I'm only planning to stay for a short period of time. Why don't we talk inside?" He turned and gave the password to the Fat Lady, who revealed the entrance for them to walk through. The young couple led directly to their quarters. Crookshanks greeted them at the door by rubbing himself affectionately against their legs. Hermione picked him up and led Sirius into their sitting room.

“I can’t believe that you two have your own quarters. This is amazing!” He exclaimed excitedly as he sat in one of the large armchairs. Dobby appeared suddenly and asked them if they wanted some refreshments.

“It’s one of the many benefits of being married” Harry, with a satisfied smile on his lips, replied after Dobby left.

“Naturally, you’re one lucky boy to have already found someone you’re so compatible with.” He grumbled under his breath. “It seems to run in your blood - your dad found your mum pretty early on.”

Harry laughed gently as he wrapped one of his arms around Hermione and lovingly pecked her on the cheek. “I won’t deny that I am. Anyway, you seemed to be very friendly with Aunt Am these days. What’s going on with you two?” Harry probed teasingly.

Dobby appeared again and handed a drink to Sirius before disappearing again.

“I don’t believe that’s any of your concern, pup.” He answered after taking a sip. “Don’t you need to change?” Sirius questioned, effectively changing the subject.

Laughing to himself that Sirius avoided the question entirely and satisfied that his godfather was comfortable, he replied, “Yes, I need to get out of these formal robes. If you have any questions, you can ask Mione. She can catch you up on everything.”

Harry headed to the bedroom. Sirius and Hermione made sure that they were really alone before speaking.

“Thank you for coming to me. I didn’t want you to have to buy him a new broom. It was something that I could do for Harry since I haven’t been able to be a godfather to him for such a long time.” Sirius said as his face broke into a smile.

“No, I should be thanking you, Sirius. Harry was so happy after he received your gift. Besides, I definitely needed help if I was going to

select a broom. You saved us both some trouble by buying it already.” She replied as she gave Crookshanks a cat treat.

Thank you. You’re the best! He replied in an excited tone as he munched on the treat.

“Why did you agree to allow Harry stay at his relatives’ place?” He asked curiously, giving her a probing stare. “He’s obviously told you about his past; and you don’t look like the kind of girl who’d follow Harry’s decisions blindly.” From their brief initial meeting, he was convinced that Hermione had a mind of her own. His last statement sounded almost like an accusation, but it didn’t upset her.

She drew a breath and released it slowly before she replied. “Yes, I know all about what they’ve done to him. It took awhile for him to tell me everything. Believe me, I wish I could have the chance to use them as targets for some hexing practice.” The threat never sounded more dangerous than when spoken calmly. “He needs to stay at his relative’s place to renew his Mum’s blood protection. Harry doesn’t really want retaliate against his relatives to honour his Mum. They don’t deserve it, but it’s Harry’s choice.” She said simply but firmly.

His brows furrowed at her answer. “He can get back at them all he wants - Lily would totally understand. She’d have murdered them if she knew how they’d abused her son. James and Lily loved him dearly.” He growled angrily in protest.

“I know they loved him - Harry’s Mum gave up her life to protect him.” Hermione answered quietly. “I also know that all of you love him and want to do things to make up for your absence, but ultimately the decision on how to deal with the Dursleys should lie in Harry’s hands, He was the one who was hurt, after all.” She declared, completely unruffled. Her hands were lying neatly in her on lap as she looked at him expectantly. Sirius realised that he wasn't talking to a fourteen year- old teenager- he was talking to a wife concerned about her husband.

Perplexed, Sirius took a moment to gather his thoughts. He soon found his voice and after clearing his throat slightly, he relented.

“Very well, I’ll respect his decision. However, I’ll be checking on you during your stay.”

“Will you have the time to do that after what happened with today’s hearing? I heard that you did a marvellous job.” Hermione replied in relief. “I’m surprised that you’re not in your office completing paperwork.”

“I’ll be heading there soon. I just wanted to check on Harry first. I’m relieved to see that he’s doing well under the circumstances.” Sirius answered as he finished his drink. “I really should get going. By the way, Amelia was here earlier to see Hagrid - he still has to complete the remaining paperwork, but otherwise his name was cleared this morning.”

She brightened at the news. “Really?” She said excitedly. “That’s awesome!”

“Yes, it is. Anyway, I still have to stop in and have a word with Dumbledore before I leave.” He announced as he stood up. Harry reappeared in the sitting room at the same exact moment dressed in his school uniform.

“You’re leaving so soon? Why don’t you stay for dinner?” Harry offered.

“I’d normally love to but I’ve got a lot to do - especially since the next person we have to convict is the Minister of Magic. I’ll be asking Dumbledore to help with the paperwork for that. It will take a lot of effort to convict a Minister of Magic and remove him from his post. I just came here directly after the Hearing to check on you. Now that I know you’re fine, I can go on with my duties.” Sirius replied with a smile. Sirius eyed Harry’s hair meaningfully. Before Sirius could ruffle his hair, Harry ducked out of reach. It made Sirius chuckle.

“Excellent reflexes, Harry. I’ll see you soon.” Sirius answered. They walked him out of the common room and parted ways.

Harry was swamped by the concerns of his friends the moment he and Hermione entered the Great Hall. They were all anxious to know how he was holding up. He had no doubt that Aunt Am must have told Susan some of what happened at the hearing. He pacified everyone with repeated assurances that he was fine - much to his wife's amusement. She had left him somewhat in the lurch by leaving him to deal with all of their friends. Harry noted that the Weasley twins were missing from the table.

"So, what happened at the hearing?" Neville asked curiously. Harry looked around and realised that everyone sitting around their table was interested in getting all the details.

"I'm sure you're all dying to know, but can you please let Harry eat his dinner first? I'm sure he's hungry." Hermione interrupted in a firm tone.

Harry was pleased that his friends backed down for the moment to allow him to eat and shot a grateful look at his wife. They soon started on a more pleasant topic – talking about each other's day while they drank some pumpkin juice. They had long finished their dinner before Harry and Hermione made their entrance. Harry and Hermione ate their dinner silently as they listened in on their friends' conversations. Cedric Diggory was sharing a story about his Potions lesson with the Slytherins. Since the next Quidditch match was going to be between Hufflepuff and Slytherin, the sixth-year Slytherins tried to prank him as much as they could.

"I was wondering why my potion was getting thicker and thicker by the second, as if it was about to burst. I barely ducked in time before the whole cauldron exploded, spilling the boiling hot potion on the Slytherins and Professor Snape. Even though he took off a lot of points for the accident, it was funny seeing Professor Snape sprouting boils." He shared with an impish grin. Everyone started laughing as they imagined the chaos in the class.

"You're lucky that he didn't give you detention, Cedric." Daphne answered with a smile on her lips. Her use of his first name in a friendly tone caused the occupants of the table to raise their brows.

She'd always spat his surname icily in the past. It was the first time the group had seen the two talking to each other amicably.

"I don't usually give people the cold shoulder for nothing. Since we've cleared the air, he hasn't done anything wrong." Daphne defended herself when she noticed their glances.

"It's about time that the Nargles finally stop pestering you. You've treated him badly because you were under their influence. Nargles makes you blind to your own feelings." Luna replied.

"Feelings?" Daphne echoed in surprise. She knew that it was a mistake to question so she immediately interrupted, "I don't have feelings for him." The smile on Cedric's face broadened with hilarity because Daphne's response was a just bit too defensive. "I only see him as a platonic friend. But, my new impression of him will be marred if he continues laughing at my expense." Daphne snapped as she narrowed her eyes. Cedric immediately turned his face away so that she would not see him laughing. Cedric composed himself after a while.

"I'm sorry. It's difficult not to jump to all sorts of conclusions. You've got to admit that it's all pretty funny." Cedric explained with a contrite smile aimed to placate her. "I know we're friends. Does that help?" He asked tactfully.

"We know you don't like Cedric that way." Susan interceded as she gave him a wink. It was refreshing to see them interacting nicely with each other and she did not want to spoil the effort Daphne was making. Daphne's dislike for him was well known since she would express her opinion whenever Susan brought up the Hufflepuff Quidditch Captain. "But you've got to admit that idea of you two getting involved is really comical."

Daphne eyed her friend with a glare that made her shut her mouth.

"Daph, what other feelings did you think I was talking about?" Luna questioned in bafflement.

A hush fell over the table.

“When the phrase ‘having feelings’ is used, it’s usually referring to that kind of feelings that Harry and Hermione have for each other.” Daphne explained.

A look of comprehension crossed Luna’s face briefly. “Oh, I’m sorry for the confusion.” She answered.

“It’s alright,” answered Cedric, who was sitting beside her.

Lowering her voice so that only Cedric could hear her, Luna responded, “I hoped you aren’t too disappointed. Those feelings take time to grow.”

Cedric blinked continuously as her words sank in. His mouth ran dry. “W-Why would I...” He stammered. He stopped in mid-sentence since he knew from the look on Luna’s face that it was fruitless to even try to deny it. “How did you know?” He whispered as he looked around furtively, as if afraid of letting their other friends into the secret. Their other friends were too engrossed in the new conversation to pay attention to what they were talking about.

“It’s obvious from the way you look at her when she isn’t paying attention.” Luna smiled at him. Cedric rubbed the back of his neck as he glanced at her awkwardly.

“I’m not supposed to stare at her anymore. It’s part of our agreement to be friendly to each other. Well, really, it’s so she’d be friendlier to me.” Cedric muttered under his breath, which made Luna laugh. The tinkling sound of laughter caught the attention of everyone at the table. The group was watching them with curious, but bemused expressions on their faces. Cedric changed the subject and asked about the hearing, seeing that Hermione and Harry had finished their meal. Before they could get an answer from Harry, the sight of the Weasley twins sneaking to their table surprised them and promptly pushed the matter to the back of their minds.

“Where’ve you been?” Harry inquired, clearly intrigued because he knew that the two were up to something from the victorious smirks plastered on their faces.

“We’ve been preparing for some dinner entertainment. We’ve finally finished it this afternoon.” One of the twins answered proudly.

Hermione arched her brows in response. “Dinner entertainment?” She echoed as she stared at the Staff table. The entranced of their aged Headmaster had silenced the Hall. It was his last day as Headmaster, though most had not heard the news.

Everyone at their table sat back to watch the show.

Albus Dumbledore walked tiredly to the seat in the middle of the Staff table. Lines of weariness were etched on his face as he slumped into his large chair. He’d completed most of the paperwork needed to begin the trial of the Minister of Magic. By the next day, he was sure he’d lose another important ally. He glanced around the table and saw that most of the staff eyed at him suspiciously - they were furious with him for betraying their trust. He let out a sigh.

He had just met with Sirius Black, the Interim Chief Warlock of Wizengamot. He made him make an unbreakable vow to stop manipulating Harry Potter. He had also given him details about the service centre he was going to work in. It was going to be tough - the centre was particularly famous for having a lack of staff to run the program. He saw the irony of his sentence; the man who once had the power to decide the fates of both Sirius Black and Harry Potter was now forced not only to serve them, but to allow them to decide his own fate.

Casting the thoughts aside, he sipped a bit from his goblet of pumpkin juice. A strange feeling came over him and he couldn’t determine the reason. Reaching out to take his goblet, he realised that his pale, wrinkly skin was turning a strange shade of orange.

Headmaster Dumbledore stalled in his seat for a moment as the rest of his skin turned orange. He had begun to expand in size, much to

the amusement of the entire school. The lean Headmaster swelled up in size until he was roughly the shape of a large ball and began to float.

Everyone started howling with laughter at the sight of their Headmaster. If it were not for his silver beard and his half-moon spectacles, most would have mistaken him for a large pumpkin. Headmaster Dumbledore was the picture of a hot air balloon, save the basket, with his silver beard trailing down, looking like a silver rope ladder.

“I was so hoping that he’d eat the dishes with beef first so that he’d transform into a cow.” One of the twins began in a disappointed tone.

“He would’ve looked like a majestic cow with that silver beard.” The other continued. The hall burst into another round of laughter when they saw Professor Flitwick grabbing the ends of his silver beard to anchor him to the table lest he float away. Then, without a warning, he reduced in size like a deflated balloon with a loud ‘pop’ sound as he hit one of the torches decorating the grey castle walls. He collapsed onto the diminutive Professor. Dumbledore sheepishly apologised to his colleague as he stood up. The colour of his skin had changed back to his original colour. The Headmaster didn’t seem to be too upset, since he knew he deserved to be pranked. He got back into his seat, avoided drinking anything, and started on his food.

He got the second surprise of the day when he started to sprout brown feathers. The skin of his lips grew hard as it transformed into a beak. Before their eyes, he was transformed into a chicken. It was a half-transformation: he kept most of his facial features. The small chicken looked ridiculous with the long silvery beard that trailed along the table like a carpet.

The entire hall trembled with sudden loud guffaws at the sight of the Headmaster. Dumbledore rushed out as fast as his new physique would allow - which was about as fast as a man taking a leisure stroll. The last thing the students saw was the long silvery beard trailing behind the brown chicken running out from the hall.

“How long will those effects last?” Harry asked, with mirth in his eyes as he turned to look at the twins.

“Oh, just for one night. He allowed you go without food for longer periods than that. He should try going without food and water for one day.” The Weasley twins answered with an evil smile. “Our esteemed Headmaster is going to remain like a chicken until the next morning or when he eats something else.”

Harry shook his head in amusement. “I must remember never to cross you.” He answered as he grinned. Cedric good-naturedly slapped the twins on the back for the good work done. Professor McGonagall was giving them a condescending look – she knew exactly who the culprits of the prank were, but the slight lift of her lips made them expel a breath of relief. She did not want to pursue the matter because she felt it was well deserved.

Harry flashed a smile of gratitude. The smile on her face grew slightly.

“How did things go at the hearing?” The Weasley twins questioned, bringing the matter back to the forefront. Harry glanced around their table and observed that everyone seemed to be paying attention to him.

“Let’s find a secure place to talk and I’ll show you what happened at the hearing.” Harry answered as he stood up. “I have an idea where we can go.” He suggested as his lips lifted slightly in a smile.

He helped Hermione up and made his way out of the Hall, his circle of friends following closely behind. They quietly left the castle and were soon headed down the path towards the Forbidden Forest. The group began exchanging incredulous glances with each other as they followed Harry and Hermione silently.

It wasn’t until they spotted the familiar wooden hut that they understood where they were going. The friendship Harry had with Hagrid was well known and it was no surprise that he would want to meet with him.

“Aunt Am should have finished his paperwork by now.” Harry began before explaining Hagrid’s situation to the group. “Hagrid was expelled from Hogwarts and had his wand snapped many years ago by mistake. Someone framed him for the murder of a girl – the ghost you now know as Moaning Myrtle. He was completely innocent of all charges. Anyway, I was told that Aunt Am was able to clear his name today.” Harry concluded with a beam, stirring great excitement among his friends.

“Excellent news, don’t you think?” Harry stated as the smile lingered on his face. The sound of Fang’s thrilled welcoming barks could be heard as they approached the hut. The door was immediately flung open, revealing an overjoyed Hagrid. Tears of joy were flowing from his eyes as his eyes fell upon his guests.

“’ Arry, ‘Mione. Lady Bones jus’ left! I’m free!” He shouted in elation as he grabbed Harry and gave him a bone-crushing hug. Harry was sure that if there were enough space, Hagrid would’ve spun him around in sheer bliss.

“Hagrid, it’s wonderful news, but you’ve got to put Harry down. Please don’t break his bones.” Hermione smiled indulgently.

Hagrid placed Harry back on his feet as he ushered all of them inside. Hagrid cheerfully made tea for all of them. “I knew both of yeh coul’ do I’,” said Hagrid as he handed each of the students a mug of tea.

“Yes, we promised we would, didn’t we?” Hermione answered as she exchanged a smile with Harry.

Harry nodded. “You’ll be able to go back and complete your studies. Actually, we have a gift for you.” Harry declared with a sheepish smile. “We were so confident that Aunt Am would clear your name that we got this for you.” Harry said, withdrawing a small box from his pocket. At the tap of his wand, the box enlarged.

Hagrid’s eyes widened in shock that Harry and Hermione brought him a gift. “Yeh shouldn’ ‘ave.” He said when he overcame his disbelief.

“It’s the least we could do.” Harry continued with a smile. “Open it.” He instructed as he handed him the box.

Hagrid looked at Harry then at the box in his hands. It looked a bit too small in his large hands. He gingerly opened the box. His eyes widened even more as they registered the sight of the gift.

It was his sixteen inch oak wand.

“My wand? How? I though’...” Hagrid trailed as he looked at Harry for an answer. He couldn’t believe his eyes. Harry wore an amused expression on his face.

“Yes, it’s your wand.” Harry confirmed. “We ‘borrowed’ your pink umbrella since it holds the pieces of your original wand and sent it to Ollivander for repair. He was able to keep the core, found more Oak wood, and recreated your wand. We thought that you’d rather have your old wand since you’ve been used to it for many years.” Harry explained.

“Thank yeh.” Hagrid answered as tears of gratitude began to well up in his eyes. Hermione immediately took a cloth for him to blow his nose into as Harry clapped him on his back.

“It’s your happy day, don’t cry so much.” Harry teased.

“They’re tears of joy.” He sobbed into the cloth. The rest of their friends joined in soothing the half- giant. His tears soon subsided and he began to worry about Harry. “How’d the ‘earing go?” he questioned as he wiped the tears away.

The knowledge that it was Hagrid who brought him to the Dursleys crossed Harry’s mind. He didn’t want to spoil this special day. Suddenly, it didn’t feel like such good idea to tell them about the hearing.

Harry exchanged looks with Hermione. She nodded her head apprehensively. He’ll find out tomorrow anyway.

Harry pointed his wand on a blank wall. "Why don't I show you all instead?" He suggested and recited the spell. The memory of the hearing, from the moment he entered, began to play on the wall.

Hagrid slumped into his chair. "I-I didn't know" He said in a trembling voice as he looked at Harry. His face was pale with remorse. "What have I done?"

"You were under Dumbledore's orders and did what you were told. Plus, ever since you came to get me, you've done more for me than anyone could ask for." Harry said in a comforting voice.

"I shouldn't have blindly followed him." He muttered in utter despair.

"It's all over now." Harry continued in a firm tone. "You, along with the rest of the Wizarding world, blindly trusted him in the past. Now's not the time to mope, but to start making changes. You see that you're denying yourself a future if you continue to work here for Dumbledore under his previous terms. He has no hold on you any longer. Pursue your dream, Hagrid. We're here to help you along the way." Harry declared. The rest of them nodded enthusiastically.

"I-I don't know. I'm not trained. This is all I've known." He stammered as he tried to think of excuses.

"We're here for you. We can provide you a home, food, and a proper education to repay you for all the things you've done for me. I'm sure Charles wouldn't mind coaching you on how to carry yourself well in society." Harry persuaded.

Seeing Hermione and Harry's determination, he resigned himself to his fate and decided to allow them to call the shots.

The news of the changes to the Hogwarts Staff did not come as a surprise to all after reading the morning paper on the hearing the day before. The hall burst into a deafening applause when McGonagall was announced as the new Headmistress. The Slytherins, with grim faces, half-heartedly clapped. They knew it signified the end of Professor Snape's favouritism.

In her opening speech, she informed the student body of the change of positions on the staff. Professor Septima Vector was made Head of Gryffindor. Professor Flitwick was made the new Deputy Headmaster. Hagrid would be quitting from his job as Grounds and Game Keeper and was taking a leave from teaching Care of Magical Creatures for a year in order to complete his studies. Professor Grubby-Plank was taking over his position in the interim. Professor Dumbledore was filling the Transfiguration post. The students were dismayed that he would still be teaching them. Everyone had read the papers that morning and knew of his disgrace. They jeered when Dumbledore stood up to acknowledge the post. Professor McGonagall held up her hand and the hall became silent.

“Make no mistake that I’ll be paying close attention to everything that is happening around the school. I will not hesitate to punish any student or teacher who encourages rivalry between houses by, for instance, overly favouring one house above another.” She shot a glance at Professor Snape. “Feel free to speak to me about anything at all if you’re afraid of going to your Head of the House. This is a school. I want this institution to be an environment conducive for learning.” She concluded in a firm tone. The hall erupted into a round of polite applause when she settled back into her seat.

Harry and Hermione made their way early to their first class - Transfiguration, so that they could speak to Dumbledore privately. The ex-headmaster was flipping through the lesson plan written by Professor McGonagall when they knocked on his office door.

“Good morning, Harry and Hermione. I was expecting you.” Dumbledore said genially as he shifted the lesson plan on the table and stood up. The office looked slightly different with the addition of the metal perch to the usually sparse room.

“I believe we need to talk about the court’s order.” Harry spoke curtly as he stood in front of his desk.

“Yes, we should. Would you like to have a seat?” He asked politely. The two teenagers did not react to his offer. “If it helps, I’ve made an

unbreakable vow not to manipulate you and another vow to serve you and Lord Black however I can for the next thirteen years." He continued calmly as he placed his two hands together.

"We don't trust you." Harry replied honestly. "You will only act in the capacity as my Transfiguration teacher unless I've requested otherwise. It's all I want for now. I don't believe that it's too much to ask." He instructed firmly.

"No, it's not too much at all, Mr. Potter."

"We won't trouble you any further, Professor. We'll see you in class." Hermione said as they walked out of the office into the adjoining classroom.

That day, Professor McGonagall had sat in on two classes - the Transfiguration lesson with Dumbledore and Potions Lesson with Snape. The class had greeted Dumbledore with cold looks but it was clear that Dumbledore hadn't lost his touch in teaching Transfiguration. He talked animatedly about the switching spell. They began the practical part of the switching after his lecture and he went around checking the students' progress. The class warmed slightly to him, seeing that he was very enthusiastic about teaching.

The Gryffindors managed to make it through Professor Snape's lesson without being punished. Professor Snape, for once, was being civil to the non-Slytherins. There was a fear that he might start favouring his house once Professor McGonagall stopped sitting in on the lesson. However, their fears were unfounded - Professor Snape remained unusually pleasant to them for the rest of the week. As a result, the level of potion making in the class increased because they did not have to brew in fear.

Professor Dumbledore became the target of continuous pranks until the end of the week when Professor McGonagall finally stepped in. The Weasley twins were nonchalant about it because they had exhausted their entire supply of tricks and Professor Dumbledore was already getting paranoid about being pranked. Moreover,

Dumbledore had other responsibilities outside of Hogwarts: he was required to serve as a counsellor at the centre regularly.

Everyone was excited about the coming weekend - it was the first Hogsmeade weekend of the year. The whole gang, except Cedric and Luna, decided to explore Hogsmeade together and they had set out, joining the exhilarated waves of students, and headed to the village. The twins, Fred and George Weasley were in charge of showing them around the Wizarding town. They pointed out the Shrieking Shack and told the group some stories about all the unusual events that happened there. They also took them to their favourite haunt, the infamous Zonko's Joke Shop, a haven for all wannabe-pranksters.

While the Weasley twins stocked up at Zonko's, the rest wandered into Honeydukes Sweetshop. The shop was filled with shelves upon shelves of sweets. There were hundreds of different kinds of chocolate filling up one entire wall. Harry and Hermione had never seen most of the items before – they'd both grown up in the Muggle World. The prospect of all the new and wonderful things led them to explore the shop earnestly. Daphne and Susan had never seen a shop with as huge a selection of candy as Honeydukes. They even stopped at the wall where the "Special Effect" sweets were. There, they read each description that accompanied the colourful jars. There were Pepper Imps, Cockroach clusters, and even blood-flavoured lollipops. Harry was sure that humans weren't the only patrons of this shop. When they finally come out of the shop, their pockets were a great deal lighter. The Weasley twins joined them soon after that, with packages bulging with their buys.

They all headed to Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop to get refills of their stationary. Harry and Hermione, who were doing both third year and fifth year curriculum at the same time, were using up their supply in an astonishing rate. Looking around the shop, he found quills that could magically write everything that was said. Harry bought several of these quills with History lessons in mind; Professor Binns, his History of Magic teacher, never failed to put him to sleep with his droning voice. Harry secretly bought another photo album for his pictures. His three other books were already full.

They finally made a pit stop at the Three Broomsticks, a pub that was run by Madam Rosmerta. The Weasley twins insisted that it was the best place to get drinks in Hogsmeade. The warm and cosy pub was crowded with Hogwarts students when they entered. The group spotted a lot of their housemates in there. Fortunately for them, Neville was able to spot an empty table and Harry conjured several chairs so that they could all sit down.

“Show off,” Susan commented in mock annoyance as she sat down.

A smile appeared on his face, “As the saying goes, if you’ve got it, flaunt it.” Harry smirked. “I read all about how to conjure furniture so I was anxious to put the spell to good use.”

“Are you sure it’s safe? I don’t want the chair to vanish while I’m still sitting on it.” Susan continued.

“Though I haven’t tried it before, I’m sure these will last as long as we need them.” Harry assured. “You could also try to conjure your own chairs if you don’t trust my work.” Harry added with a playful smile.

“I’ll have learn the spell when I get back to school.” Susan concluded. Harry and Neville offered their services to pick up the drinks and they came back with a glass of Butterbeer for each person.

“There are other good shops in Hogsmeade. You can pick up robes for any occasion at Gladrags Wizardwear and get Quidditch supplies and other magical equipment at Dervish and Bangs. If you want to send some mail out and don’t want to use the school owls, there are over three hundred owls ready to deliver mail at the Post Office. The Hog’s Head and Madam Puddifoot’s are two other places you can stop in for a drink, though the clientele at the Hog’s Head is a little iffy. I wouldn’t be caught dead at Madam Puddifoot’s.” Fred Weasley said as he and his twin brother both shuddered.

That piqued the curiosity of the others. They all turned to the twins with questioning glances.

“It’s a tea shop. Pretty much only couples go there. It’s way too frilly for me.” George Weasley answered. Susan and Daphne exchanged looks with each other.

“That’s it? I guess we’ll have to get the full description of the place from students who’ve actually gone there.” Daphne answered with a sigh.

“Are you suggesting that we don’t date? Maybe you should go and check it out with Cedric.” Fred answered fearlessly. The table was suddenly silent as Daphne turned to Fred with an icy glare.

“I’ve never seen you interested in anything but pranks, Fred.” Susan commented offhandedly as she rolled her eyes. Fred was displaying his reckless Gryffindor courage.

“You’ve got that right. Who’d want to go out with that plonker?” George chuckled, defusing the whole situation, as he gave his twin brother a meaningful look. Some of the occupants of the table laughed. Fred, sensing that George had saved him from a fate worse than death, laughed forcefully at the jokes that the others began to crack at his expense. Their conversation grew light-hearted and they kept on trading barbs until it was time to head back to Hogwarts.

On Sunday evening, they saw a visibly shaken Dumbledore joining them for dinner. From the haunted look on his face, it was clear that he had begun to truly regret some of his decisions. Face to face with children from abusive environments, he was no doubt forced to see for himself what kind of pain he’d allowed his charge to go through. Harry was sure that the children must have put him through hell, knowing that he was one of the ones who stood aside and watched another child going through the same physical and emotional hell. The eventful week soon ended, much to everyone’s relief.

Their lessons began to pick up pace as fall was quickly turning into winter. Harry and Hermione found themselves using the House in order to cope with all their work. Harry and Hermione also had to manage the Potter fortune in addition to their schoolwork. Since they were doing both third and fifth year work, their workload was

immense. Regardless of all their obligations, the young couple still managed to find the time to continue Occlumency lessons with Neville and Luna as well as tutor their friends whenever they needed it. Taking a page out of Hermione's book, the rest of the gang revised constantly, ensuring they had mastery of their lessons. The Professors were amazed at the improvement the group had made.

Halloween that year was undoubtedly Harry's best Halloween ever. Even though the hall was somewhat lacking in the holiday spirit due to the absence of Hagrid's giant pumpkins, the house elves made special effort in preparing their food and trying to make the Great Hall look festive. Sirius, Amelia, Oswald, and Hagrid decided to cheer Harry up by surprising him with a visit. Dobby and his fellow house elves had prepared a banquet big enough to feed forty people as they threw a party in memory of Lily and James Potter.

"I'm sure Prongs and Lily would prefer that we celebrate the fact that they fought valiantly to protect their only son. They once told me that the thing they were most proud of wasn't being Headboy or Headgirl, graduating from school with one of the best results ever, or fighting with Voldemort several times – their crowning achievement was having had you as their son." Sirius recalled with tears in his eyes. "To James and Lily!" His statement was met with cheers from the room as they raised their bottles of Butterbeer. Professor Lupin and Professor McGonagall were also on hand for the celebration that night.

The adults caught up on each other's lives. Sirius was adjusting well to his new position and was learning about handling the Blacks' businesses from Oswald during his spare time. Aunt Amelia was naturally busy with all her duties at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Minister Fudge was allowed to finish the last two months of his term as Minister of Magic before he served his sentence in Azkaban for two years. Uncle Oswald was busy with all his businesses, as well as the Potter and Black holdings. Hagrid was extremely happy with his arrangement: he was sitting for his N.E.W.T for Care of Magical Creature in a month while living at Potter Mansion temporarily. Charles had seen to it that Hagrid was taught some necessary skills like Apparation. He was hopeful that he'd be able to make his first successful apparation soon. The tutors that they had

engaged for Hagrid refreshed him for all subjects, like Charms, Transfiguration, and Potions. Hagrid needed these skills so that he could cast the proper spell or brew the correct potion for the creatures.

“Let’s spend the Christmas holidays at my place.” Harry suggested. “We’ve recently added a new wing to the Potter Mansion.”

“A new wing?” Sirius asked as he looked at Hermione for clarification.

“Harry found himself fancying Muggle entertainment. Because of the lack of electricity in the Wizarding World, we bought a house in the Muggle world. The greatest part is that the house is right next door to my parents’ place.” Hermione explained excitedly. “Anyway, we found a way connect the two houses with a magical hallway that allows the Muggle house to become a part of Potter Mansion.”

“Let me get it straight, you built a permanent portal between the two worlds to connect these two places together?” Aunt Amelia questioned.

“Yes, that’s exactly what we’ve done. We engaged the Goblins to help with that particular task. They are familiar in building hallways like this because they’ve figured out how to connect the Muggle banks to Gringotts.” Harry answered.

“How about the wards? Anyone could use the place to attack Potter Mansion.” Uncle Oswald pointed out.

“We were planning to go to the Muggle House one weekend to ward the place. However, Charles assured us that he has taken care of everything and that the wards of the Potter Mansion were automatically extended to cover it.” Hermione replied.

“So, we can only visit the new wing through Potter Mansion but only a selected few can enter through the entrance of the Muggle house?”

“Until Harry gives you the address, that is. The place is apparently under a very strong Fidelius. Right now, only Harry and I, and of

course, my parents are allowed through that entrance.” Hermione responded. Everyone except Professor McGonagall agreed to spend Christmas at Potter Mansion.

The party went on past midnight, but the students in attendance were excused to return back to their respective common rooms after curfew.

The Hufflepuffs played against the Slytherins in the third match of the season in November. It was a match whose outcome could be predicted before it was even played. Even though the Slytherins had better brooms, they neither had the skills nor the discipline of the Hufflepuffs. Cedric easily led his team to victory, thrashing the Slytherin team with a score of “300 to 0”. Gryffindor would once again be facing the Ravenclaws in February.

The fall term was racing to the end. The entire school grew frenzied with studying for their exams. Most of the students in Harry and Hermione’s circle found themselves quite relaxed since they already completed most of their review. The term test ended as quickly as it had started. It was no surprise that Hermione and Harry took the positions of first and second respectively for both the third and fifth years, much to the satisfaction of their Professors. All too soon, the students found themselves on board the Hogwarts Express.

Harry magically expanded the cabin to hold all nine students and their four pets. Crookshanks decided to keep away from Katrina by sitting on Hermione’s lap. The bluish grey cat lay haughtily on her owner’s lap, watching him with disdain in her emerald eyes. The two cats decided to avoid each other ever since their first meeting - they were never seen together in the same room at the same time. The effort that the two cats took to avoid each other amused the two Snowy Owls.

Hermione lifted her cat so that she was looking directly at him. Crookshanks stared at her enquiringly. “Crookshanks, you have to be a nice host to Katrina. She’ll be staying with us during the holidays.”

Why? Doesn’t she have a place to live? Crookshanks answered grumpily. Hedwig shook her head at his comments as Callan laughed.

“Daphne’s family is joining us for Christmas so Katrina will be coming along.” Hermione explained calmly.

I suppose the Porcelain vase has some sense of loyalty. At Hermione’s slight frown, he changed his tune. I mean Katrina. Very well, I’ll keep my remarks in check. Crookshanks answered sulkily. Hermione beamed in approval and lowered him back to her lap. Seeing that his owner was happy, he decided to be more amiable to Katrina. Katrina had glared at him momentarily when he called her a ‘Porcelain vase’ but bit her tongue when she realised that he had rectified his error.

“I prepared Katrina beforehand. She’s determined to be an amiable guest. She’ll be sharing the room as me in any case.” Daphne said as she handed her familiar to Cedric. Hermione understood the reason why - she was reducing the chances their pets would have to meet each other.

“Those two remind me of certain people,” commented Susan as she looked at Cedric then at Daphne. Cedric carefully took Katrina from Daphne and into his arms. The scene astonished the occupants of the cabin since Katrina was famous for being an Ice Queen like her owner - she didn’t like to be handled by just anyone. Katrina usually only allowed Hermione and Daphne to hold her. Katrina purred in delight as he scratched her behind her ears.

“Hmm?” He responded as he raised his brows curiously, completely oblivious to the conversations going on around him. Cedric, unlike the rest, would only celebrate Christmas with them instead of staying over at the Potter Mansion. He was spending the bulk of his holidays with his family.

The others shook their heads – Daphne and Cedric were clearly getting closer but neither wanted to acknowledge it.

Harry held Hermione close to him as they listened in to their friends’ conversations. It would be the first time they’d spending Christmas

together as a couple. The train soon slowed to a stop as it pulled into King's Cross Station.

Their Christmas holiday had just officially begun.

A/N: Hi everyone. Thank you for all the reviews. I think ,after reading all the reviews, that the idea of justice differs with individuals. I'm not going to mince my words.I'm alright with all comments. I know that I'm lacking as a writer but if you must critic my work, please mind the tone. In plain terms, if you find something lacking, please suggest it in a polite way. It's disturbing to feel as if I owe the reviewer a favour when I finish reading the review. I'm sorry if I offended anyone but I want to keep writing a pleasurable hobby. Thank you for your understanding. Have a great week.

Chapter 20

Beta-read by frustr8dwriter

The guests were led to their rooms to rest before dinner. Charles and his capable team of house elves saw to the living arrangements of the guests. Only the Weasley twins, Susan, and Daphne were staying at the Potter Mansion for the full two weeks. Neville, Luna, and Cedric would be joining them on Christmas Eve and staying at the Potter Mansion until the school term began.

Alone in their room, Harry engulfed Hermione in a tight embrace. Hermione raised her brows questioningly as she gazed into his eyes.

“You were wonderful.” Harry whispered as he affectionately leaned in to brush his nose across hers. “Fred and George were grinning from ear to ear after you introduced them to Sirius.”

A dazzling smile spread across her face as she laid her head on his chest.

(Flashback)

There was a broad beam on Harry's face when he saw his welcoming party on Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. Sirius, Amelia and Oswald were standing among the other parents who were waiting anxiously for their children to alight Hogwarts Express. Harry and Hermione stood at the exit of the train and watched the blissful scene of their friends reuniting with their families unfold in front of them. There were smiles on their faces as they greeted their families warmly. Aunt Amelia was hugging Susan, Uncle Oswald was grinning at his two beloved daughters. Even Uncle Moony had hurried out of the train to be reunited with his best friend, Sirius. The emotional picture touched his heart and made him smile.

He glanced at his wife and realised that something had caught her attention. Her brows were furrowed in worry. Hermione nudged him suddenly as she motioned to something. Harry scanned the area that she was pointing to and spotted the Weasley twins lingering at the back of the crowds alone. They were looking at the happy families

with dejected looks on their faces. Harry's heart sank at seeing them upset. Before he could say something to Hermione, she had already headed towards the Weasley twins with a determined look on her face. Hermione tapped on the shoulder of one of the Weasley twins to get their attention.

"You two wouldn't happen to be interested in meeting the Marauders, would you?" Hermione questioned with a small smile. She knew she had them hooked.

"The Marauders? You mean the Marauders who created the map?" They asked incredulously as they exchanged looks with each other before staring at the brown-haired witch.

There was a look of indifference on her face as she explained. "Well, you know that Harry's father was one of them, so I now know the identities of the three other Marauders. Would you like to meet him?" Hermione offered again.

The faces of the Weasley twins brightened at the prospect of becoming acquainted with, in their opinion, Hogwarts' best pranksters. With wide smiles on their faces, they continued excitedly. "Of course, we'd love to! Are they here?" They anxiously scanned the crowds. Hermione's face broke into a grin. She beckoned them to follow her and led them to Sirius.

Sirius was nonplussed when Hermione introduced Fred and George to him. He looked to Hermione for clarification but it was Remus Lupin who answered him - by sharing one of the Twins' latest exploits with Sirius. Confusion was so replaced with delight as Sirius realised that they were pranksters just like him. With an excited smile on his face, Sirius began to share with them some of the tricks that the Marauders had pulled during his days.

It was heartening to see the wide grins plastered on their faces.

(End Flashback)

“You know I had to. They looked so sad and lost.” Hermione replied as she buried her head in his chest. Harry chuckled lovingly as he held her close, enjoying the feeling of having her in his arms.

“Why don’t we visit Mum and Dad before we have dinner?” Harry suggested. Hermione brightened at the prospect of seeing her parents and heartily agreed. Harry and Hermione anxiously changed out of their robes into comfortable outfits of shirts and jeans.

Crookshanks was at their heels as the couple rushed down the winding stairs to the newly made Magical hallway at the side of the foyer. It looked just like the other dark hallways in the Mansion, lit by floating golden candles. Harry and Hermione would never have noticed it if Hermione hadn’t remembered that it used to be a wall. Oil paintings of scenes of nature in heavy gilt frames lined the dark passage. Harry noticed that unlike the other oil paintings found in the Potter Mansion, these were non-magical. With each painting, the scenes transited through the ages, finally ending in a modern landscape of skyscrapers and large bridges. The metamorphosis was befitting, Harry and Hermione found themselves in a different world when they walked out of the short passage.

A brightly lit room came into view. Natural light was filtering through the frosted glass on the white ceiling into the house. It was a cosy place with clean lines and decorated with modern furniture. From the foyer, he could see the large hall. It was furnished in the same contemporary design – with plush lounge chairs that would seat plenty. There was a huge projection television sitting in front of room facing the seats.

They were now in Knightdale.

There was a thrilled smile on Hermione’s face as she dashed out of the house towards the Granger’s residence with Crookshanks following closely behind. Harry hurried along and trudged through the well-maintained garden and to the next house. Hermione was already at the door of the Granger residence by the time he caught up.

There was a sound of lock being turned and the door opened slowly, revealing the face of Jean Granger. Her face lit up like a Christmas tree when she spotted her daughter. With a squeal of delight, Hermione hurriedly flung her arms around her mother and hugged her tightly.

There were identical looks of joy on their faces when they pulled away. Hermione excitedly embraced her father when he also appeared in the doorway.

“Hi Mum.” Harry greeted with an affectionate smile as he waved unsurely. The look on Jean’s face was enough to convince him that he ought to greet her the same way Hermione greeted her. With a large grin plastered on his face, he wrapped his arms around her and embraced her tightly as well.

When she released him, she took a good look at him. “You look as if you’ve grown.” Jean observed with a loving smile on her face. “It seems that we’ll need to take you clothes shopping soon.”

There was mirth in his eyes when Harry chuckled. “I’m really trying not to grow so fast. We keep having to enlarge my clothes.” Harry answered with a smile. “It’s really wonderful to see you again – I’ve missed you both.” Harry continued.

Jean looked at her son-in-law affectionately.

“We’ve missed you, too. It’s been far too long since we’ve seen you. We’re glad that we’re finally neighbours, that way we could more of you, especially during the holidays. By the way, we’ve been keeping track of everything that’s been delivered to your place and I noticed that you’ve only received entertainment equipment. Aren’t you going to be living there?” Jean questioned curiously as she led him indoors. Before he could answer, Dan walked up to him and ruffled his hair. There was a wide grin on his face as he looked at his son-in-law.

“Hey Dad, lovely to see you. Thanks for helping us to secure the house next door.” Harry beamed warmly as he gave Dan a one-armed hug.

“Good to see you, too, son. The house looks good – but as my lovely wife has asked, will you be staying there? All I’ve seen is the house being remodelled to hold your top-of-the-line electronic gadgets.” Dan enquired. Jean gently picked up the ginger-coloured cat and cradled him lovingly.

Harry smiled at his in-laws. “Why don’t we wait until you two come over for dinner tonight? I’ll explain everything then. I also want to introduce you to my family and friends. We’ll test the entertainment system later.”

“Will we be imposing on you?” Jean questioned. “I mean we can always go out to dinner.” It was then that he realised that the Grangers were still in their work clothes, a sign that they had just returned home. Harry knew that the Grangers had a habit of changing out of their clothes the moment they reached home.

“It’s no bother, Mum and Dad. You’re welcome to join us as soon as you’re ready. Take your time unwinding from what I’m sure was a busy day - our door is always open for you. Let’s talk more inside.” Hermione replied as she came out of the kitchen carrying a tray of drinks and led them into the living room. The Grangers and Harry obediently followed her and sat down.

Hermione handed each of them a drink. Harry pecked her cheek in gratitude when he took the glass of ice water from her and helped her by bringing the tray back to the kitchen.

Hermione took the opportunity to look around. The house was exactly as she had remembered but there was a new addition in the living room - a long and large mirror was now hanging on the empty wall. She returned her attention to her parents when she felt Harry sit down to her. Harry instinctively put an arm around his wife as he scooted closer to her. Hermione happily laid her head in the crook between his neck and shoulder.

The adults were overjoyed to see that they were very much in love. It was difficult not to notice the glow Hermione was exuding.

“Now, tell us, did anything exciting happen at school this term?” Jean asked inquisitively as she stroked Crookshanks. The Grangers liked Crookshanks a lot, much to Hermione’s delight.

“Well, Harry and I were able to clear the name of Harry’s godfather Sirius Black like we’d planned. As a result, it sparked a chain reaction that led to the conviction of our ex-headmaster Dumbledore and a change of staff at Hogwarts,” summarised Hermione.

“That sounds as if you two have been very busy. Why would your ex-headmaster be convicted after you proved that Harry’s godfather was innocent?” Jean continued, puzzled.

Harry and Hermione exchanged looks with each other. Taking the cue, Harry took a deep breath and plunged into the long tale. He told the fascinated Grangers most of the story, except for the part when Ginny tried to kill Hermione. The Grangers could not believe their ears when Harry recounted the point in the hearing in which Dumbledore confessed to most of his crimes.

“He wrongfully imprisoned your godfather and placed you with those abusive relatives so that he could manipulate you?” Dan repeated angrily. Even the hand that was stroking Crookshanks rhythmically stopped as Jean stared at Harry with a somewhat woeful expression on her face.

Harry nodded and finished the tale, outlining Dumbledore’s punishments and the changes at Hogwarts.

The Grangers did not respond right away, but it was clear from their faces that they were fuming. Dan expelled a breath and calmed down visibly. “I really wish there was a way to stop all this, Harry. You shouldn’t have to go through all this torment simply because you’re special. I’m glad that you’re finally recognised as an adult so that you don’t have to live under anyone’s thumb.”

“That is indeed a relief. Not only am I emancipated; I now have a wonderful family who cares for me. An amazing set of family and

friends to spend Christmas with.” He grinned brightly as he gave every occupant in the room a meaningful look. Hermione snuggled closer to Harry.

“It will be a wonderful Christmas for us all,” answered Jean with a fond smile on her face.

“The first of many to come,” Dan assured.

The teenagers glowed with delight as they basked in the love of being with their family.

“We were thinking that we should all spend Christmas at Potter Mansion, with all my friends and family. There’s quite a bit of people coming and there’s more room there. Would you two mind?” Harry asked as he searched their faces for a response.

There was a look of surprise on Jean’s face. “Christmas should be celebrated with as many people as possible. Of course, we wouldn’t mind. We’d like to meet all of them too.”

The smile on Harry’s face widened at the answer. It was no doubt going to be the best Christmas he would ever have.

After spending some time together, Jean and Dan Granger finally headed upstairs to change their clothes. Once they came back down, Harry suggested, “Why don’t we head back over? I think it’ll be time for dinner soon,” before standing up. “I’m sure Charles will be frantic if he can’t find us.” He offered his hand to Hermione and she took it. They walked back to their house and entered it. “Well, the most special thing about this house, other than the fact that it is next door to you, is that it’s actually connected to Potter Mansion using magic.” Harry explained as he led the Grangers through the hallway.

They noticed the change of surroundings and soon found themselves at the mansion.

“Amazing.” Dan exclaimed in awe as he took in his surroundings - the timber venetians that complemented the rich shades of

mahogany in the parquet flooring and the large magnificent drape with the gold emblem of the Potters. "We're really at the Potter Mansion."

"Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Granger." Daphne and Susan said brightly as they walked gracefully down the regal stairs. Katrina gracefully made her way, with her head held high. Crookshanks remembered his manners and held his tongue before he could make any remarks. "It's nice to see you again. Are you going to be staying here as well?" Susan asked, with an excited smile on her face.

"It's wonderful to see you too, Daphne and Susan." Jean answered with a beam. She still remembered their names. "No, I don't think that we'll need to stay over. We're sort of neighbours now."

"So your idea worked? You managed to link the two houses together?" Daphne questioned as she turned to face Hermione.

"Yes, my parents came over from that wing. It's much too confusing to call it a house." Hermione replied. "We haven't really checked the electronics but I think it should be working fine."

"Fantastic! You can take us on a tour of the neighbourhood you've grown up in." Susan said eagerly.

"Knightdale is nothing exciting, I'm afraid," answered Hermione quickly. "There are only houses and a park with a playground. You'd need to walk a distance if you want to find any shops."

"I don't mind. We didn't have a chance to explore a non-magical neighbourhood the last time. So, would you take us later?" Susan questioned hopefully.

Seeing the determined look on Susan's face, Hermione relented and agreed to take them after dinner.

Dinner was an enjoyable affair. After a brief introduction, everyone sat down and began to talk amicably. The Heads of the Ancient

Houses were glad to finally meet the Grangers. The Grangers were considered to be part of the family since they were Harry's in-laws.

The house elves out performed themselves with dinner. It was a grand sight to see them entering the dinner room while carrying trays of food. With a nod, they placed a plate of food before each of their guests. They did a bow before exiting the room, leaving their guests to enjoy their meal. After that, they had instinctively brought dish after dish of scrumptious food.

It was a dinner fit for royalty.

Harry and Hermione made it a point to complement the house elves whenever they entered the room to refill or bring in dishes for the wonderful food. They made a point to express their gratitude to the chefs in the kitchen.

Uncle Oswald and Aunt Amelia were soon engrossed with a conversation with Dan and Jean respectively. Sirius quickly found himself occupied with a conversation with Harry and Hermione. The other teenagers engrossed themselves in a conversation with Remus. All of them liked the young Professor and were happy to learn more about him. Remus, unlike the other guests, was living with Sirius because he was using the two-week holiday to help Sirius out.

The teenagers found the idea of taking a walk after such a heavy meal appealing. Leaving the Weasley twins and the adults to their own devices, the rest of the teenagers went for a stroll in Hermione's neighbourhood. Crookshanks and Katrina decided to tag along as well.

"We don't have neighbourhoods like this. It takes a few hours of walking to get to the next house in my area." Daphne commented as she looked around the serene neighbourhood. She spotted a group of children, playing at the playground. With excited shouts, some of the children slid down the large brightly coloured slide. There was a merry-go-round and several large swings surrounding the slide.

“That’s the playground.” Harry introduced as he pointed to the place. The parents sitting on the benches at the side beckoned their children to go home. The children hurriedly had their last go at the slide before following their parents, deserting the playground.

“Well, it seems that we’re in luck.” Harry smiled as he looked at Hermione. He jogged over to the empty swing and sat on it. Harry began swinging skilfully, climbing higher and higher as the momentum increased. Hermione beamed when she realised that Harry was enjoying himself.

“That looks like fun!” Susan squealed. “How do we do that?” She questioned as she looked at Hermione expectantly. Harry leapt off the swing nimbly when it had reached the peak, landing on the ground with a wide grin on his face. Hermione shook her head at his reckless play but said nothing. He took it upon himself to teach Susan how to use the swing. Hermione did the same for Daphne, seeing that she was also unfamiliar with it.

Soon, the two witches were squealing with delight, as they swung high into the air. Harry and Hermione grinned as they watched them from the side. Hermione cradled Katrina in her arms as Harry carried Crookshanks.

The outline of the setting sun blurred as the bright yellow blended with the flaming red. The whole neighbourhood was bathed in a tangerine glow. There were sounds of teenagers laughing boisterously and loudly as the group walked past the playground. They stopped when they spotted Daphne on the swing.

An oversized T- shirt hung awkwardly from the shoulders of the gangly teenager who was swaggering down the pavement with a lighted cigarette between his second and third fingers. His gang followed closely, training their eyes upon them as if they were their prey. It made Harry become defensive when he saw that gangly one’s followers were burly and huge.

Harry did not like the way they were eying his friends. Harry walked slowly to match the pace of the leader as he approached Daphne and

Susan, keeping an eye on all of them. Katrina leapt gracefully off Hermione's arms and bolted towards her owner.

Daphne and Susan sensed that something was wrong but before they could walk towards Harry, the leader spoke.

"Hi, pretty. Do you fancy having some fun? I can guarantee that you'd have a good time with us" The lanky teenager asked as he blew the smoke into Daphne's face. She didn't like the way he was looking at her. It was as if he was undressing her with his eyes. His gang rumbled in laughter as they encircled the swings. They looked to be in their late teens or early twenties. Daphne stiffened. Susan could only sit there silently and watched the scene unfold. Before his fingers could latch upon Daphne's arm, Katrina flew straight onto him, clawing him with all she had.

That teenager let out a girly scream as he desperately tried to tear the greyish blue cat from him. Katrina was too fast for him and he couldn't lay his hands on her. Harry took the opportunity to close the gap between them and checked on Daphne. Satisfied that she was fine, he spun around to face him.

Suddenly, the teenager spun around and finally caught her, holding her by the folds of skins around her neck. Katrina thrashed about in the air trying to land her claws on him but he had held her firmly away.

"No!" Daphne screamed when the teenager yanked her familiar and positioned himself to hurl her on the wall.

In a mighty spring, Crookshanks leapt from nowhere and clawed the hand that was holding Katrina. He landed firmly on his fours and began to encircle him, eyeing the teenager with his yellow eyes as he held his bleeding hand and shouted in pain. He had dropped Katrina and she landed on her four paws safely. Crookshanks stood near Katrina in a protective way as he fixed his eyes on the teenager was howling in pain.

"Get those cats!" He shouted loudly.

“No one touches them.” Harry spoke authoritatively as he drew himself into full height. He felt all eyes trained on him as he watched them closely. Katrina, much to the relief of Daphne, appeared unharmed and the cats immediately returned to their owner when Hermione called them.

“Isn’t that the freakish bookworm?” One of the guys standing behind the injured teenager spoke when they spotted Hermione standing beside Harry. “Surprise, surprise. Everyone thought you’d killed yourself since we haven’t seen you for so long. After all, you were so ugly. The rumors appear to be false eh?” His lips were pulled back into a mocking grin.

Harry’s eyes narrowed into slits as they hardened. “You’ll not speak to her in this manner.” He let his anger rise together with his voice.

“You must be the bookworm’s boyfriend. It’s amazing that she actually found someone. That’s not important. We can deal with her later.” He snapped. He raised his hands, revealing the bleeding wounds left by the cats. “Your bloody pets scratched me!” He spat into his face. Harry’s face grew tight as he resisted his anger.

“You deserved it - you tried to harm her owner.” He answered coldly. “By the way, what’s amazing is that it took this long for Hermione to find a boyfriend – obviously it’s because there is no one here who is worthy of her.

The face of the leader turned purple at the retort.

“Boys, I think it’s time to have a bit of fun with the bookworm and her friends. They look so appealing.” He smirked as he tried to approach them. A proud sneer twisted his face. The gang took his lead and surrounded them.

Harry was truly seeing red now.

“Oh, I don’t think so. You’ll never lay a finger on anyone here.”

Harry's fist connected with the leader's nose with an awful crunch, causing him to stumble and collapse like a felled tree. Blood flowed as he curled on the ground. The rest of the group charged at him and tried to attack him.

The two girls watched in shock as Harry effortlessly dealt with all them. The goons were no match for him in terms of skills, speed and strength.

Harry dodged their attacks nimbly and set them crashing into the ground with his powerful hits. When one of them tried to hold Hermione as hostage to threaten Harry, Hermione nimbly dodged his flailing hands. Before she could attack, a body sailed across the air and landed accurately upon him.

Hermione could tell it was the work of Harry. Hermione gave her assailant a satisfying kick.

Hermione noticed that Harry was taking time to deal with the one who had called her a bookworm. He encircled the towering and burly guy with a predatory look in his eyes. It was as if he was playing with him, antagonising him as he adroitly dodged all the blows from him until his prey began to pant and sweat profusely from the exertion. His eyes were as wide as saucers when he realised that Harry was in total control of the whole situation. There was a feral gleam in Harry's eyes as a smile grew.

"I think it's my turn," Harry concluded and he ended the fight easily. All of them lay sprawled on the floor when he was through with them. The anger dissipated from his eyes as he observed the girls. He heaved a sigh of relief when he realised that they were all right.

Watch it! Katrina yelled. The lanky leader was about to thrust the knife into the unsuspecting Harry. Katrina valiantly leapt and clawed the hand with all her might. Harry grabbed her agilely as he swatted him away with a sweeping blow, causing him to tumble onto the ground. The knife flew out of his hands and landed on the grass nearby.

Harry shook his head at that underhand attack as he picked the knife up and tossed it into the nearby bin. "Do not come near Hermione or her friends again or I'll make sure you pay for it even more. Now leave!" He commanded sharply. Some of them helped their leader up and scurried away.

"I'll remember you! Scarhead!"

Harry drew his hand through his hair. He was tempted to chase after them and obliviate their memories but he resisted. "Let's go home. I've had enough for the evening." Harry answered as he stroked Katrina. "Thanks for saving my life." Harry smiled as he offered her a treat.

The girls remained silent as they walked back to the Potter Mansion.

"You were great back there, Harry." Daphne began gratefully as she looked at him. "Thank you."

"No problem. Angel, who are they?" He asked as he looked at his unusually quiet wife. "Do you know them?" He was certain that his wife was not angry with him for fighting. Even though using magic would have ended the fight before it began, they would need to do a lot of explaining because those bullies were Muggles.

"The boy who tried to stab you is one of our neighbours, Joe Warren. We went to the same primary school. He's a few years older than us." She answered distantly. Harry held her hand and rubbed the pad of his thumb over her hand lovingly. Hermione met his gaze and knew that he was worried. She silently promised that she would explain more when they were alone.

"I'm sorry that you had to deal with them." Hermione answered as she turned to face her friends. "This neighbourhood is usually quiet and generally safe."

"It's alright. It showed us how just incapable we were of protecting ourselves. We really need to learn some self-defence. Would you two be willing to teach us?" Daphne asked hopefully.

“It’s not that I’m unwilling to teach, but I’m no master at hand-to-hand combat.” Harry replied as he rubbed the back of his neck tersely.

“We only need to learn enough to be able to protect ourselves without magic.” Susan persuaded as she looked at him with anticipation shining in her eyes. Harry looked at Hermione unsurely and she gave a curt nod. “I guess it’s a yes.” Harry answered sheepishly as he rubbed the back of his neck.

The beam on the girl’s face widened at his answer.

“Good job, Crookshanks and Kat. You were brilliant.” Harry praised.

“Yes, you were absolutely great.” Hermione continued as she stroked Crookshanks. They showered them with praises as they head back to the Potter Mansion.

None of them spoke of the event when they joined the rest of them at the sitting room. Everyone itching to test Harry’s new personal theatre, walked over to the wing together. The Wizards were intrigued by the technology as their children excitedly explained the workings of the theatre to the best of their abilities.

Harry spared no expense on ensuring the comfort. His personal theatre was large and comfortable. The room was filled with large chairs made specifically with comfort in mind for all while watching the movie. The house elves made popcorn and drinks for them to take along with them to the house since they couldn’t use magic to conjure up some snacks. Everyone paid close attention to not using magic in the vicinity of the equipment. The lights went off, enshrouding them in darkness as the movie Star Wars: A New Hope began to roll. Lines of large yellow words against the black starry backdrop flashed as the theme song of Star Wars began to play.

No one noticed when the two cats approached each other. There was a daisy in Crookshanks’ mouth as he approached Katrina. Katrina was lying on the carpet, eying him closely. There was just something different about Crookshanks. After a while, she realised what it was -

the haughty cat was being unusually meek. He laid the daisy in front of her. Thanks for saving my owner, Katrina. Crookshanks began awkwardly as he looked at Katrina. I'm sorry for my previous conduct- I was unreasonably cruel. I wanted to offer you food but I'm sure you've had plenty of it so here's a flower to express my heartfelt apologies and gratitude. He apologised sincerely.

Are you sure you're not mocking me, Crookshanks? Katrina began guardedly as she looked at the flower. You aren't giving me a flower because I'm a porcelain vase?

No, I'm not. Crookshanks disagreed. I read somewhere that giving flowers is a way to express one's thankfulness and request for forgiveness. The sincerity of his tone convinced her that he meant no harm.

Katrina chuckled lightly. I guess I've got to offer one back to you. Thank you for stepping in to save me. I know you didn't have to. She said earnestly as she pawed the flower playfully.

No, you're wrong – I was obliged to. You were bravely trying to protect your mistress. Crookshanks explained. Take this as my way of saying sorry for all my unfair comments. Katrina stared the ginger-coloured cat with her unusual green eyes as he spun around and disappeared. She took the flower using her mouth and went back to her basket.

It was already late into the night when the movie ended. They enjoyed the movie immensely. When the lights came on, they stayed a little longer to discuss their itinerary for the next day. They decided to do some Christmas shopping. After much discussion, they agreed to head to the Muggle side of London to shop before going over to Diagon Alley. The Grangers and Oswald were going to take the children there. Sirius and Amelia would join them after work.

"My wife, Felicia and my youngest daughter, Astoria will coming with us tomorrow." Oswald said. The smile on Daphne's face grew when she realised that her sister was joining them. She had missed her sister. "We'll meet at Granger's residence at eight in the morning. I'll take care of the transportation." He went on. Most of the adults bade

them a good night as they walked back to the Potter Mansion and to the apparition point, which was at the main gate of the Potter Mansion, leaving the teenagers and the Grangers.

The Grangers suggested the kind of clothing they should wear, specifically for the Weasley twins' benefit, before bidding them a good night and leaving the house for their own.

"We have a schedule here at Potter Mansion. I'm sure most of you know why." Harry said as he flashed a teasing grin at his wife. Hermione playfully swatted his arm but there was a smile of amusement tugging her lips.

"You're welcome to join us in our routine. Our day begins at six a.m. sharp. We go for our morning run and come back to have breakfast a little after 7 a.m." Harry outlined as they walked back to the Mansion.

"Harry, you should take a break while we're on holiday. Besides, it's getting chilly outside." One of the Weasley twins commented grumpily.

"We have a training room here. We'll be using that tomorrow." Harry replied as he lovingly rubbed his thumb along Hermione's hand.

They found themselves back at the foyer of the Potter Mansion.

"We'd love to join you, Harry. We'll meet you back here in the morning. Good night." Susan answered. Daphne and Susan climbed the stairs towards their respective rooms. The Weasley twins grumbled good-naturedly but promised to run with them before heading back to their bedroom.

Hermione was brushing her long brown wavy hair when Harry exited the shower. He immediately took her hairbrush from her hand and tenderly attended to his wife. "It must've been difficult for you when you were young." Harry whispered as he gently brushed her hair.

She turned slightly so that she was looking at him. "Not as difficult as it was for you. I had a loving family to turn to. I became their target because I was the only one who stood up against him when he was

bullying another boy the same age as me.” Hermione answered him with a small smile on her lips.

The corner of his lips lifted into a grin. “You were definitely meant to be in Gryffindor. Something else happened I suppose?” Harry asked. He knew that the tale was not finished.

“I had my first bout of accidental magic. I think I must’ve cast a full-body bind on him – he suddenly couldn’t move at all. Everyone else ran away.”

Harry put the hairbrush on the dresser then kissed her the forehead.

“What happened after that? Did you get into trouble?” Harry whispered curiously as he took one of her tresses and began to entwine one of his fingers with it.

“Nah, the adults thought that he was just afraid. Warren felt there was something strange about me that he couldn’t put his fingers on. From then on, they called me ‘freakish bookworm’ instead. Of course, they tried to pick on me as often as possible. I was an easy target since I was always alone. My other classmates didn’t like me back then. The girls in my class enjoyed teasing me and doing anything they could to upset me. They always called me a ‘know-it-all’. Daddy and mummy tried to do something about it, but it was no use.” Hermione admitted, as her eyes grew distant. Harry turned her around so that she was facing him.

“I finally understood why you were so upset that day. You wanted to walk out of the shadows of that past when you came into Hogwarts. You shouldn’t have had put up with Weasley or with me for that matter. I was such a prat in the beginning, not defending you. I should’ve known better. I could’ve have stopped him sooner. I’m so sorry.” Harry replied as he lovingly caressed her cheek. Hermione leaned into his touch.

“It’s alright. It’s all water under the bridge now. I know how hard it was for you back then – Ron was your first friend.”

“I promise that I’ll always be here for you. I won’t ever let anyone treat you that way again.” Harry promised as he wrapped his arms protectively around her. “Besides, I don’t think you’re a ‘know-it-all’. I think you’re just passionate in sharing your knowledge.” Harry smiled as he kissed her head fondly.

“I know you’ll protect me, sweetheart. I saw what you did - you threw one of the guys on my attacker on purpose.” Hermione smiled knowingly.

There was a sheepish expression on his face as he drew his hand nervously through his messy hair.

“I know you’re capable enough to handle him -I might even lose to you if we engaged in hand-to-hand combat. I just wanted to do that little bit for you.” Harry explained. Hermione had learnt to compromise with Harry in regard to his desire to protect her. She had discovered a long time ago that this was his way of expressing his love for her and allowed him to do so. Hermione leaned forward and brushed her lips across his sweetly. She pulled back a little so that she could look into his eyes.

“Thank you, my love.” She whispered. Harry leaned in and fused their lips together. Slipping his arms underneath her, he effortlessly carried her to their bed without breaking the contact.

All of the teenagers woke up before dawn for their run. Harry led them to the gym that he had requested to simulate a beach. Harry and Hermione were glowing with pride when they realised that their friends could finally keep up with them. The months of hard work were finally showing.

After a quick shower and some breakfast, the teenagers were promptly at the Granger residence at eight. A shiny black limousine stopped outside the house and Oswald stepped out of the car. He was neatly dressed in a shirt and trousers. Harry and Hermione felt it was unusual to see him without his robes. “Good morning.” He greeted as he opened the door.

They greeted him back before climbing into the limo. Harry and Hermione greeted Daphne's mother, Aunt Felicia, warmly. They'd met her at Harry's society ball some months back. This was the first time they'd been formally introduced to Astoria, Daphne's younger sister. It wasn't difficult to tell from where the two sisters had inherited their beauty and their dispositions. Daphne embraced her sister tightly before she started the round of introductions. The Grangers and the Greengrasses engrossed themselves in a conversation, leaving the teenagers to talk to one another.

"You look like twins." George commented as he looked at the two sisters closely.

"I can assure you we are as different as night and day." Daphne replied in her usual emotionless tone.

"You've got that right, Daph." Astoria smiled warmly. "I must say you look much better up close, Harry."

Harry raised his brows in surprise. "Why, thank you, I think." He answered as he rubbed the back of his neck—he was unsure of what to say.

Before Daphne could say anything, Astoria raised her hands in surrender, "I know he's taken. From the rumours, I don't think anyone but Hermione could match him" Astoria continued with an impish smile. Daphne shook her head.

"It's the other way around, Astoria. I don't think anyone but Harry can match up to Hermione." Susan beamed as she looked at the couple. Harry responded by holding Hermione close.

"I have to agree with you, Susan." Harry answered happily, earning a dazzling smile from his wife. The occupants of the car smiled as well, seeing how sweet they were together.

"How are things going with you and Cedric?" Astoria asked her sister curiously, much to the mortification of the latter. The occupants in the car burst out laughing at the sight of Daphne gaping.

“There’s nothing going on other than we’re friends.” Daphne argued. “Where did you hear about that?”

“From Tracey, of course.” She answered offhandedly. Before her sister could interrupt, Astoria clarified, “She told me that you haven’t said anything bad about him for a long time.”

There was a look of exasperation on Daphne’s usually emotionless face. “That’s supposed to mean something?” Daphne questioned, unable to comprehend the logic behind her assumption.

“Coming from you, yes.” Astoria answered simply. “You despise lookers and admirers. Cedric is both.”

“I don’t despise them. I just don’t like the way they stare at me, Toria.” Daphne protested as she rolled her eyes in annoyance.

“Whatever you say, Daph. I’m convinced that Cedric will eventually be a Greengrass.” Astoria concluded before turning away to watch the scenery outside.

Susan laughed at the look of shock on the usually expressionless face.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Daphne demanded heatedly.

Astoria expelled a sigh as she turned to look at her older sister. With an even tone, she explained, “You pay a lot of attention to him, Daph, more so than any other guy you’ve known. Your reaction to him isn’t one of indifference. All other guys are invisible to you, even Blaise. That guy will do anything for you and you still won’t take notice of him. As for Cedric, he can make you feel uncomfortable just by the way he’s looking at you, highlighting the fact that you’re affected by him, further proving that you’ve some feelings for him.”

Daphne found that she was unable to dispute that logic. She rubbed her temples slightly. “I think you should meet another one of our close friends – you two would get along famously.” She concluded.

“I’m glad that there is finally someone who can grate on your nerves, Daph.” Susan answered as she laughed. Everyone burst into laughter in response. Truly, the two sisters were polar opposites.

Augusta Longbottom was surprised when she saw her grandson at the station. It wasn’t the physical change he had undergone - he had lost his baby fat – rather it was the change in personality. Neville had always come across as a quiet and unassuming boy. Even though that didn’t change, but now, he carried himself with more confidence. He walked a little straighter and he was less afraid of expressing his own opinions especially when it came to his friends.

His habits had changed fundamentally since he returned from school. He had still dedicated a lot of time to his greenhouse but he spent his mornings running around the estate then mediating before joining her for breakfast. When she questioned him about it, Neville had answered that he was learning Occlumency from his new friends. The sight of him reminded her of his father Frank and she smiled. Neville was finally growing up, she thought proudly.

Cedric was staring quietly at the scenery outside the window as his parents were conversing with their guests, the Changs. He was sure that his father was starting to worry about his lack of girlfriends since he had hinted at it several times. His father repeatedly told him that he found the love of his life in Hogwarts. He knew that his father was hoping that Cho and him got together. After all, his parents had long accepted her into their family as if Cedric didn’t like anyone, he was certain that the person he wanted didn’t return his feelings.

The presence of his father distracted him from his thoughts.

“Cedric, why don’t you escort Cho to Diagon Alley? I’m sure you want to do some Christmas shopping.” Amos Diggory suggested with a smile. The stunning girl with long black hair smiled hopefully at him when he turned to look at her. Cedric knew that she would never disagree with his father, something that made her well-liked by his parents.

“Alright, I guess we can Floo over. We’ll be back sometime before dinner.” He answered quietly as he stood up and walked to his room for a change of clothing. The adults insisted that they take their time.

Sirius, Amelia, and Remus finally met up with them when they arrived at Diagon Alley. When they exited the pub, they found the roads crowded with people doing their Christmas shopping. The teenagers, garbed in Muggle outfits, found themselves out of place when they saw a sea of pointed hats of different colours. The Grangers, who had finished shopping, decided to stay behind at the pub and have a drink.

The large group split up and parted ways. Harry went off with the Weasley twins while Hermione and Susan decided to brave the shops together, leaving the two Greengrass sisters alone.

Daphne and Astoria headed to Flourish and Blotts to search for several gifts. The shop was filled with people. Daphne found herself falling after she accidentally knocked into someone. Strong arms shot out to catch her before she could hit the ground. Daphne found herself staring into a pair of grey eyes that held concern for her.

“Are you alright, Daph?” Cedric asked worriedly as he helped her up. His arms were securely around her waist as he gazed at her. Neither of them noticed how close they were to each other as their eyes met. Suddenly, Daphne jerked away when she realised that their faces were only inches apart from each other. She averted her eyes as she smoothed the imaginary creases on her clothes.

Cedric sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck as he looked at her. The sight of her being embarrassed brought a smile to his lips. “I’m sorry for bumping into you, Daphne. Fancy meeting you here, though. Are you shopping for Christmas presents?” He questioned cordially. Affected by his warm smile, Daphne beamed cordially in response as she looked at him.

Before she could answer, another female voice interrupted her.

“Is everything okay, Cedric?” Cho asked worriedly as she glanced at them in bafflement. Seeing a large grin plastered on his face, the smile from the brunette’s face faded immediately. She had never seen Cedric being so happy before.

“Who might this be, Cedric?” Cho asked conceitedly as she held onto Cedric’s arm possessively. The corners of Daphne’s lips lifted in amusement when she realised that Cho was showing that Cedric was her man. Cho’s plan fell apart since Cedric was giving Daphne his undivided attention. He raised his brows at her tone but introduced her to Daphne anyway.

“Daphne, this is Cho Chang, a fifth year Ravenclaw. Cho, this is Daphne Greengrass.” Cedric answered as he cocked his eyebrows slightly when he noticed that Daphne looked amused but didn’t understand the reason why.

“A pleasure to know you. This is my sister, Astoria...”

“You must be Cedric Diggory. It’s nice to finally meet you.” Astoria began excitedly as she looked at the towering Hufflepuff.

There was a genuine warmth in his eyes when he looked at her. “Nice to meet you, too.” He answered with a charming smile. Daphne shook her head slightly when the smile on her sister’s face widened and turned back to scan for the book she was looking for.

“What brings you here on such a crazy day, Cedric?” Astoria asked cordially as she shot a glance in her sister’s direction. Daphne ignored her as she searched for the book.

“My dad wanted me to accompany Cho to Diagon Alley so I decided to do a bit of Christmas shopping.” He replied as he continued to shoot side-glances at Daphne. I’m sure you’ve already met Harry and the others. I’m actually shopping for Hermione’s gift.” Cedric answered as he planted himself next to Daphne and began scanning the shelves beside her for a suitable book. Astoria smiled when she realised that Cedric had presently ignored Cho. It was obvious that Cho carried a torch for Cedric since her eyes betrayed her. She was

shooting daggers with her eyes at Daphne, her rival for Cedric's attentions. If looks could kill, Daphne would be dead. Cedric was oblivious to all of it.

"Are you getting a book for Hermione?" He asked quietly, trying to gain Daphne's attention.

"Yes, I am." Daphne answered disinterestedly as she walked to another shelf and examined the books on it.

"Great minds think alike - I also thought Hermione would appreciate a book better than anything else but I have no idea what she's read. Do you happen know if she needs any particular book?" Cedric asked cordially as he admired the third year discreetly from the side. She looked equally stunning in a simple pair of jeans and shirt.

"I'm not too sure. I was planning to get her some books on household charms. I'm sure she'll find it useful." Daphne replied thoughtfully as she looked over several selections. Turning to him, she continued in a soft tone so that only Cedric could hear her, "You know, it isn't nice to ignore your girlfriend."

His jaws nearly touched the ground. "She isn't my girlfriend." He protested furiously.

"Well, she seems to think so. The way she held you was way too possessive to be just a friend." Daphne explained calmly as she quirked a brow in disbelief.

"She really isn't." He insisted. The intensity of his stare made her speechless. She met his gaze. He swallowed visibly when he realised how excruciatingly near they were. He could even feel her warm breath on him. He was entranced with his sparkling blue eyes that were searching his eyes that he instinctively leaned in, desperate to reduce the distance between them.

Those sensual lips were begging him to taste them. Out of the blue, she turned away, presenting him with her side profile as she once again became absorbed in checking the books out.

It left Cedric in a stupor.

“Cedric, I’m leaving now.” Cho exclaimed when she saw that he was more interested in Daphne. Her female pride suffered a blow.

There was no answer. In a huff, she stormed out of the shop.

Astoria smiled, that was an action worthy of a Slytherin. Cedric didn’t even notice that she had left.

That was close, Daphne thought as she exhaled a sigh. She didn’t understand why she needed to prove her sister wrong. She pushed her thoughts away and focused on the task at hand.

“On second thought, I’ll get them a combined present.” Daphne grinned impishly. The Hufflepuff regained enough to remember that he needed to get presents for Hermione.

“I think I’ll get those books on household charms and cooking for Hermione and Harry.” He answered awkwardly as he quickly took the two books. “What are you getting them?” Cedric questioned as she looked at her curiously.

“You can come with us if you really want to know.” Daphne answered secretively as she walked to another shelf where all the books on Herbology were and selected a book for Neville. After selecting one, she walked to the counter to pay for the item. Cedric hurriedly followed along and paid for the items he had chosen.

It was time for dinner when the group finally met up after finishing their Christmas shopping. They were surprised to see Cedric Diggory with the Greengrass girls. Oswald frowned when he saw Cedric and his eldest daughter together but said nothing. All of them had dinner at a Muggle restaurant before going on their separate ways.

Cedric was grinning like a Cheshire cat when he returned home. There was a frown on his father’s face when he entered the house. He jerked his thumb in the direction of the sitting room before heading

to the room. Baffled, Cedric left his shopping bags in the living room before following his father into the sitting room.

“What happened in Diagon Alley? Why did you let Cho come back alone?” Amos asked his almost-adult son when he sat down.

“I didn’t even know that she went off. I met some my friends in Diagon Alley.” Cedric answered nonchalantly.

“Cho told me that you met with the Greengrass girl.” Amos answered as he shifted in his seat and looked at him closely.

“Yes, Daphne and I are friends. She was there with her sister.” Cedric answered indifferently as he lay back in his seat. They didn't do anything to suggest otherwise, did they?

“Only friends?” Amos echoed in surprise. “Cho said that you were both acting more than friends.” Amos retorted. His tone softened. “Cho’s such a nice girl, and pretty to boot. You both like Quidditch. I can’t see why you don’t like her. After all, you’ve get along well since you were young.”

“I didn’t say that I don’t like her. She’s nice enough to be around. I can’t imagine why she would leave suddenly without telling me.” Cedric answered as he rubbed the back of his neck tersely. Cedric liked Cho as a friend and nothing more. After all, they had grown up together.

“It’s best if you keep your distance from Greengrass. Her family is famous for being very calculative, shrewd and proud. Girls are sensitive to the female company you keep.” Amos said as he stood up. It was no surprise that his father would have such an opinion of the Greengrass since they belonged to different social classes and did not interact much with one another.

Before Cedric could speak up to defend them, his father had interrupted.

“You know that Cho forgives easily. Apologise to her if you see her later and everything will be fine. Try spending more time with her, I'm sure you'll start to see her in a new light. Try asking her to spend time with your friends.” Amos Diggory instructed before leaving the room.

Cedric shook his head as he took his items and trudged upstairs.

A/N: Hi, thank you for the glowing reviews. I know I didn't have time to reply some of you but I'm humbled by some of the remarks. Anyway, thank you for choosing to continue reading my story. Thank you frustr8dwriter for editing my work. I'm having a writer's block. The next chapter may not be updated in time. Have a good week.

Chapter 21

Beta-read by frustr8dwriter

There was just something about the Christmas Season that made people let down their hair and enjoy themselves. Hermione, at the moment, was comfortably tucked into Harry's side as she happily hummed along to the familiar tune of one of the Christmas carols that were playing on the radio. Harry couldn't help smiling at the sight of his wife being so at ease. They were accompanying the Grangers to pick out their Christmas tree. The day was informally designated as a family day since the Greengrasses, Boneses, and the Weasleys returned to home to get their houses ready for the holidays. Sirius had to return to work to handle some pressing issues while Hagrid had personal matters to attend to. The smile on his face grew when he heard Dan whistle cheerily along.

They soon found themselves trudging through the snow finding for the perfect tree for their home. To be specific, it was for the Granger House. Harry couldn't help but call the house that his wife grew up in, home. After all, it was the place where he first experienced the love and care of a family. Most importantly, it was where he married his beloved wife.

Hermione's nose pinked from the cold wind as she walked around, looking for the perfect tree in a Christmas tree plantation. She had once told Harry that she always like to have her say when it comes to decorating their home during the holidays. Seeing that her parents had backed off and were content with agreeing with all she had suggested even though she was only supposed to help them, Harry knew that what she said was true. He hurriedly fell in step with Hermione as she went on autopilot.

"That one's too thin," she muttered to herself as she searched the lot for the thing she was seeking. She looked like a person on a mission with the determined set of her chin. "No, no. It's still not full enough." Hermione continued under her breath as she pulled Harry after her by the hand. Hermione seemed to be able to find a flaw in every tree she saw. Hermione soon released him when she realised

that he couldn't keep up with her. Harry was simply baffled; he could hear all her thoughts racing through her mind as she studied each tree. All the trees pretty much looked alike in his eyes. Dan gave him understanding smile when he saw the expression on Harry's face.

"You know that Hermione had to learn that from somewhere." Dan answered with a mischievous wink as he shot an imperceptible glance in his wife's direction. Harry laughed when he realised that Dan must have had to endure this process annually since he'd married Jean. Jean arched her eyebrows enquiringly as she glanced at them. Before she could ask, she was interrupted by Hermione's voice.

"Mum, Harry!"

She stood in front of the tree, eyes narrowed, and brow crinkled in concentration. Her hands were on her hips and her lips pursed in contemplation. She glanced briefly at them. "What do you think of this one?" The tree in question looked a lot like the other trees that Hermione had previously dismissed. Harry stopped to scrutinise the tree closely.

"I think it's wonderful." Jean answered with a small smile after staring at the tree for a moment. She didn't need to have a mind-link to know that her daughter really liked it. Harry and Dan heartily agreed with Hermione's choice.

Hermione brightened immediately. "I guess this is it." She concluded with a smile as she walked to Harry's side. Harry automatically put his arms around her waist. Apparently that must have been the keyword because Dan immediately set off to look for the owner of the lot. He looked at their future Christmas tree, standing so tall and wide, and made a face.

Turning to Hermione, "I suppose now I have to get to work? Let me guess, I'm probably going to be sweating after this?" Harry asked pointedly as he gazed at Hermione.

“Yes, you will be pretty soon. You and Dad will have to saw the tree down and carry it to the car. That’s why I made sure that you had such a large breakfast this morning.” Hermione answered as her eyes twinkled playfully.

“I should’ve known that you’d put me to work when you offered me second helpings. You don’t feed me extra for nothing.” Harry muttered in faux grouchiness under his breath.

“Besides,” she continued as if she didn’t hear anything, “I think you look really sexy when you work those muscles.” She said in a low sultry voice. Pearly laughter escaped from Hermione when Harry playfully flexed his biceps in a Mr. World pose. Harry playfully wrapped his arms around his giggling wife as he laughed with her.

It was absolute torture. His muscles were protesting violently at the abuse he had to endure to transport the tree to the Granger’s house. He couldn’t help but compare the experience to Toll’s merciless weekly muscle training sessions. It also didn’t help that Harry made sure that he was carrying most of the weight so as to alleviate the burden on Dan. His father-in-law was red in the face from the exertion. Well, at least he managed to avoid getting scratches from the pine needles.

Hermione and Jean didn’t make their life easier when they were adamant about setting the tree in the exact middle of the living room. Dan and Harry tiredly collapsed on the couch after properly positioning the tree. Hermione and Jean rewarded their mates with cups of hot tea. Looks of gratitude crossed their faces when they took a sip of their tea.

“I’m going to use magic to cut and transport the tree from the backyard tomorrow. We have many trees, I’m sure one of them will do just fine.” Harry promised as he closed his eyes.

Hermione chuckled lightly as she scooted closer to him. “We decided make today a ‘family’ activity, but tomorrow, you’ll have everyone around to help. And yes, we do have some very beautiful trees in our backyard. I’m sure we can find the right one there.” She answered as

she looked at him intently. "Anyway, today couldn't have been that bad," teased Hermione as she absently stroked his arm. Seeing the twinkle in her eyes, he smiled as he absently tucked a stray lock of hair back behind her ear.

"No, not at all." Harry answered, seeing the unabashed joy on her face, it was worth the aches. He lifted her hand from his arm and kissed it tenderly.

Her answering smile was dazzling.

The next day, clothed in thick jackets, the Greengrasses, Susan and Amelia Bones, Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, the Grangers, Harry, Hermione, and the rest of their friends headed out to the forest on the grounds of the Potter Mansion, near the Quidditch Pitch, in search of a Christmas tree. Hermione was much faster in selecting the tree this time, mainly because of the required height of the tree. They needed a tree about two stories in height. Hermione, with Amelia's help, inspected the trees carefully before deciding on the perfect tree. The men got to work at once. Sirius used several Diffindos to cut the tree down, while Remus levitated the tree easily.

There were looks of incredulity on the Grangers' faces as they watched the whole process. Magic definitely made everything easier.

There was only one mishap while they were choosing Christmas tree. The Weasley twins decided to hide behind the greenery, waiting for the right moment to strike someone with a well-aimed snowball. They waited until the girls turned their back on them before tossing the cold snowballs in their direction. There was a good reason why they were beaters and not chasers. The projectiles missed their target and hit Sirius instead.

Sirius was shell-shocked at first. Suddenly, devilish curl of his lips appeared on his face.

He whipped out his wand and cast a spell at the tree under which the Weasley twins were taking shelter. The snow trapped by the pine needles of the tree fell on them, covering them completely with snow. The Weasley twins looked like a pair of poorly formed snowmen

when they froze. Everyone roared in laughter when they saw them. The twins quickly shook the snow off themselves like dogs shaking water out of their coats after a bath.

Their faces were as red as the roots of their hair as they glared at Sirius. He was clutching his stomach as he laughed loudly.

“We’ll get you for this, Sirius!” Fred roared as he swept the last remains of the snow from his jacket. Susan and Astoria took the opportunity to sneak up to Fred and George and shovelled large clumps of snow down their jackets, causing them to howl from the cold. They dashed away before the Weasley twins could take revenge, giggling madly. The Weasley twins changed their targets and gave a chase after loading up on ammunition.

Spotting Amelia shaking her head at the childish ways of Sirius, Sirius tossed a snowball at her, hitting her gently in the face. A frown marred her face for a moment before she broke into a grin.

“You know this means war.” Amelia threatened as she lowered herself to the ground and prepared ammunition to fight back. It soon escalated into a full snowball fight. They were laughing or giggling madly as they tried to dodge or pelt one another with snowballs. It became a free-for-all - everyone was tossing snowballs especially at those of them who weren’t paying attention. The tree was left hovering in mid air, forgotten as everyone joined in the battle. The scuffle grew more intense. They began to form teams to defend and attack effectively.

“Hey! I’m on your side!” George growled when he was hit by three snowballs simultaneously - one of them from his twin brother. That got the twins to start another fight – this time with each other. They tried to shove as much snow as they could into each other jackets. Harry was laughing uncontrollably at the sight and did not notice the snowball coming at him until he felt the impact on his back. With a stunned expression on his face, he whipped his head around and saw Hermione giving him an innocent look.

The corners of his lips curled in amusement. "I know it was you, Mione." Harry answered. Without giving her any warning, he lunged at her. Giggling crazily, a sound he hardly heard her make, she ducked away from his outstretched arms and started running away from him. "Oh no, you don't." He continued as he chased her. She tried to make a beeline through the trees but he caught her around her waist and used his body weight to pin her firmly onto the ground. They rolled around the snow playfully as he held her close. When they lay sprawled out, with his body covering hers completely, he propped himself by the elbow as he watched his wife closely.

"Say you're sorry." Harry demanded. His eyes were sparkling from all the merriment as he met her gaze. Hermione had ceased struggling and regarded him curiously. Her cheeks were pink with amusement. All the laughing subsided when their eyes met again after they searched each other faces. His eyes were focused intently on her, communicating the adoration he had for her. His warm breath fanned over her face, as she looked at him unwaveringly. Hermione, as if in trance, applied slight pressure on his neck so that he would lean in.

Suddenly, the sound of someone clearing his voice surprised the young couple. Harry immediately rolled off her and stood up. It was true that they were married but Harry was only thirteen and Hermione just barely turned fourteen. It made Dan uncomfortable seeing them so intimately entwined. There was a sheepish expression on Harry's face as he helped his wife up.

Jean swatted her husband for his interruption. "They're married for goodness sake."

"They're still so young..." Dan protested, as Jean dragged him away.

"What happened to the tree?" Hermione questioned suddenly as she searched the area.

The large tree had disappeared suddenly during their fight. Everyone hurriedly rushed into the house to check. They heaved a sigh of relief when they found the missing tree. Hagrid, who had returned from his

lessons, took it upon himself to bring the tree in while they were all focused on the snowball fight. Sirius, Oswald, and Remus immediately hurried forward to help position the tree properly, while Hermione supervised the task. After a while, they managed to get the tree in the exact middle of the foyer.

They rested for a moment, enjoying the hot chocolate and Christmas treacle tarts that the house elves had prepared for them, as they reminisced about the highlights of their afternoon. They agreed that the girls should play chasers on the Quidditch team because of their accuracy.

The most challenging task came next: they had to decorate the huge tree. The large group stood in front of the magnificent tree and felt daunted by the task. The lower branches could be done by hand but the higher branches required magic to hang any ornaments. Even Hagrid couldn't reach the top portion of the tree. Hermione and Jean immediately came out with a detailed plan, assigning various duties to make things easier.

Harry knew that they couldn't use Christmas lights on the tree and was curious to find the magical equivalent of it. He was shocked when he learned that they used brightly coloured fairies to decorate the tree. One simply needed to open the box and they would arrange themselves neatly on the large tree. There was no need to ensure the equal distribution like the way they did in Granger house. With music playing on the Wizard's Wireless, they spent the rest of the day decorating the tree, helping in any way they could as they chattered lightly.

The tree trimming was a wonderful experience, especially when everyone was participating in all the festivities. Hagrid kept dropping the ornaments onto the ground and Harry was able to save some of them with a few spectacular dives. Amelia would good-naturedly cast a 'reparo' at those ornaments Harry was unable to save. Decorating the tree together brought them closer as a family and helped to bridge the gap that existed between them due to the lack of communication for the past few years. Hagrid, like Remus Lupin, was also accepted into the huge family of the Four Ancient Houses.

When the tree was finally finished, they all took a step back and admired the finished product. As this was Harry's first family Christmas, he was given the honour of placing a large golden star at the top of the tree. He managed to complete the task by flying to the top of the tree with his broomstick.

The Christmas tree was simply beautiful – with twinkling fairy lights, shiny tinsel, and a hodgepodge of colourful ornaments in assortment of shapes and sizes. They all thought it was the best tree they'd ever seen and quietly exchanged smiles with each other. Harry placed his arm around Hermione's waist as they stood together. He took in the sight of the majestic tree, the happy faces of the people that were now his family – and knew that he wanted to etch this memory into his mind forever.

Soon it was Christmas Eve. Sounds of cheery laughter filled the smaller dining room of the Mansion. It was a tight fit for a group of over twenty. To Harry's surprise, all their friends' families had turned up for dinner. Mr. and Mrs. Diggory, Lady Longbottom, and Mr. Lovegood all came during the evening to visit. The free flow of good alcohol helped them to warm up to each other quickly and soon they were laughing and chatting like old friends.

On the other end of the table, there was a chorus of excited conversation as they updated each other on how their holidays had been thus far. Astoria found that she clicked with Luna well as her sister had predicted, since the second-year Ravenclaw was equally forthright as she was. Cedric told them about the time he'd with his family and the Changs. It was then they learned that the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw Quidditch Captains were childhood friends. Daphne and Astoria remembered Cho Chang well.

“Personally, I don't really like too many of the Ravenclaws. After all, none of them stood up for Luna.” Harry said as he looked at his whimsical friend. “What do you think about Miss Chang?”

Luna stuck her lower lip out as she mulled over her impression of Cho Chang. “She isn't really a nasty person. I think she just needs the approval of others so she tries to do things that will make her well

liked. Cho never stood up for me because she was afraid her friends would reject and make fun of her.” Luna answered.

Cedric nodded as he furrowed his brow. “Yes, she’s always been that way - caring too much about what others think. You were spot on there, Luna. However, she shouldn’t have allowed anything untoward to happen to you since she is a prefect. It just wasn’t right to stand by and let it happen. I didn’t even know about what they were doing to you, Luna. At least, not until I’d heard that Harry barged into the Ravenclaw. I’m so sorry about that.” Cedric declared sincerely as he looked at Luna.

Luna smiled dreamily and shrugged it off. “It’s alright. I met Harry and Hermione because of what they did, and by extension, everyone here. I guess I have to thank them in a way.” Her smile grew large as she looked at each of her friends sitting at the table. Susan and Hermione reached out and gave each of her hands a squeeze.

“Anyway, isn’t she the person you go to Hogsmeade with all the time?” Neville questioned. He was curious because he remembered that Cedric always turned down their offer to join them in Hogsmeade because he had to accompany his childhood friend.

Cedric’s face grew tense. He rubbed the back of his neck tersely and nodded.

“Well, she’s always welcome to join us when we go. Is there a particular reason why you have to go with her alone?” Hermione questioned.

A frown marred his face as he tried to explain the peculiarity. He shot a furtive glance at his parents sitting across the table and began when he saw that they were engrossed in their own conversation. “My dad insisted that I take her to Hogsmeade because he’d like us to develop feelings for each other. He wants us to get together. He’s anxious to see me dating soon.” He admitted honestly.

“Well, I think you two would make a good match, Cedric.” Daphne said nonchalantly. “You look great together. By the way, I still can’t imagine why she ran off without telling you the other day.”

Cedric seemed to have missed her comment so she briefly told them of the event that took place in the bookstore while they were Christmas shopping. Hermione and Susan exchanged significant looks as Daphne concluded her tale.

“Anyway, would you mind if Cho comes over tomorrow? Our parents are going to be gone all day tomorrow and she’d be alone at home. It’s okay if you’re not too comfortable with it.” Cedric asked.

“No, I don’t mind. What’s with one more person?” Harry replied. “We could play a game of Quidditch and try out the pitch out back if it doesn’t snow tomorrow.” He added excitedly. The adults joined their conversation when they overheard them talking about Quidditch. The conversation switched to the Quidditch World Cup that was taking place in England the next year. Harry brightened when he heard that the four Ancient Heads of House and their families were expected to attend. Lady Longbottom or Sirius Black would get tickets since they were part of the Wizengamot. It stirred up the excitement among the teenagers as the adults told them about the past Quidditch cup matches they had watched.

Soon, the sound of the clock striking twelve rang through the house.

It was Christmas!

With joyous shouts, they wished one another “Merry Christmas” with friendly hugs or handshakes. After the warm wishes were exchanged, Mr. Lovegood, Lady Longbottom, Mrs. Diggory left the Potter Mansion after bidding them a goodnight. “Thank you, Lord Gryffindor for allowing Cho to join you tomorrow.” Mr. Diggory smiled as he lingered longer to express his gratitude. “She’ll be here in the morning.” He concluded and bade them a goodnight before catching up with the group that already apparated home.

Oswald, Felicia, Hagrid, and Lupin were next to bid them goodnight before heading to their rooms. Jean kissed Harry and Hermione on their foreheads, something that Harry got used to, before she and her husband went back to their house. Sirius and Amelia proceeded to the sitting room to continue their conversation in private. They were officially together. Amelia and Sirius had announced it earlier that day that they were dating. The rest of the family expressed their approval heartily. Lupin and Oswald even commented that it took them way too long to admit it.

The girls were so excited to have Luna back with them that they wanted to have a girls' night at Daphne's room.

"Why don't you use Hermione's room? It's larger and it has a sitting area." Harry suggested.

"It's connected to your room, Harry." Hermione answered as she curled her fingers around his arm. "I doubt you'd be able to sleep if we decided to hang out my room instead." Hermione tenderly brushed her lips across his and smiled. "It's sweet of you to offer though. We won't be up that late."

In a low voice, he said, "Am I taking the fun out of things? I'm sorry. I'm spoilt. I can't sleep without you."

The smile on her face widened. "No, it's the same for me too. I can't fall asleep without you." She whispered back. He leaned in and kissed her properly.

He was breathless when he pulled back and gazed at her. "I'll spend time with our pets. We've been neglecting them since we've here."

"Daph tells me that Kat kept the daisy that Crookshanks gave her. You should ask him about that but don't stay up too late." Hermione warned before following the rest of the girls upstairs. Harry accompanied the guys upstairs and headed to his room. Hedwig was perched on the stand near the window, her white feathers a striking contrast to the dark night sky. He reached out to ruffle her feathers as she hooted in excitement. "Merry Christmas!" Harry said as he smiled.

Merry Christmas, Harry. She hooted as she nipped his finger affectionately. Crookshanks made his appearance by leaping onto the large bed and purring softly. There was a rat in his mouth as he fixed his yellow eyes on Harry.

“Well done, Crookshanks.” Harry said as he reached out to scratch him at the back of his ears. “Hermione would be delighted if she knew you went hunting.”

No, it’s for me. It’s a Christmas present for Hedwig. Crookshanks answered as he put the rat in the food dish. Hedwig thanked him before devouring the rat before Harry. I guess you didn’t get your pets any gifts. Crookshanks said in an accusing tone.

“Who says I didn’t? I guess it’s no harm giving you your presents now, right?” Harry questioned as he smiled. He summoned Crookshanks’ present into his hand and set it on the floor. “Merry Christmas, Crookshanks. It’s from Hermione and me.” Crookshanks immediately hopped off the bed after expressing his gratitude. He purred when he realised that Hermione had wrapped his gift with extra ribbons so that he could play with them. Turning to Hedwig, he set a small box on the table next to the perch. She hopped over to the table and opened the present with her talons. It was a small device, no larger than a thumb. She trained her large amber eyes on Harry and waited for his explanation. He summoned a large book into his hand and demonstrated the function of her gift by clipping it at the bottom of the book. “We got a small device charmed to flip pages according to your movement.” Harry continued. Hedwig raised her right wing and the page flipped. She hooted her gratitude as she excitedly continued trying out her gift.

Harry smiled when he felt her joy. Hedwig’s Christmas gift would save her a lot of trouble. The sound of Crookshanks contented purring as he played with the wrapping made him smile. He had forgotten about his new scratching post as he played with the wrappings. Harry rolled to his stomach and he watched Hermione’s familiar enjoying himself. It was in this position that Hermione found him in later - asleep with a serene smile on his face.

Excited chatter filled the room as everyone sat in the living room on Christmas morning. The adults took to the couches while the teenagers sprawled out on the floor with their pets on their laps. Kat was lying on Daphne's lap as she trained her eyes upon the piles of present lying neatly under the large tree. The presents had been arranged according to whom it was addressed to. Hermione was absently stroking Crookshanks as he lay on her lap. The two large snowy owls flanked the two sides of the large couch as they waited impatiently for the group to open their presents. Seeing that everyone was comfortable, the teenagers sitting close to the tree took a present from each pile and handed everyone a gift.

The gifts were from Harry and only Hermione seemed to receive a different present. Only the sounds of wrapping paper tearing could be heard as they eagerly opened their presents. Sirius opened the box and found a shiny, expensive-looking black watch nestled within. "It's a watch." Sirius declared in wonderment and surprise as he lifted his watch into air and examined it intently. Looking around the room, he discovered that everyone but Hermione had a watch. What was interesting to note was that each watch was different as Harry had the watches made to fit each individual's personality. They exchanged looks of bewilderment as they mulled over the significance of the gift.

With a knowing smile, Harry explained. "It's more than just a watch. You can use it to communicate with one another. Hermione and I each have one." He answered as he raised his arm for all to see the watch he was wearing. "You'll find that it's indestructible and that it can also be used as a portkey. The ones that Hermione and I have don't have this function, but you can still portkey to us. Each watch comes with special functions to cater to your different needs. The instructions are in the box."

Everyone grew excited as they tried out the functions in earnest. They started port-keying in the house. They realised that they had to ask the permission of the other person before they could activate the portkey and appear by their side. It was not lost on them how useful the gift was.

“This should work at Hogwarts too, right?” Neville questioned.

“I should think so. I think being the heir of Gryffindor allows me a few favours from Hogwarts herself.”

“Thanks, pup.” Sirius said excitedly. They thanked Harry for his thoughtful and practical gift.

Hermione found an entire series of novels by her favourite author when she opened Harry’s gift to her. They were even autographed by the author. She happily threw her arms around him and enthusiastically kissed him on the cheek because of it.

They opened the rest of their presents and were mostly delighted with what they received. The Weasley twins received a combined gift from the group. They were shocked to be the owners of a Firebolt each. Their names were engraved on the sides so that they wouldn’t mix them up. “Wicked!” They began excitedly as they checked out their new brooms. “We have three Firebolts on our team now!”

Harry and Hermione received a two-person tent from Daphne. Harry and Hermione looked at their gift with great suspicion. The exchanged looks of bafflement as they looked at Daphne for an explanation. It was Sirius who answered, though.

“I think it’s a rather useful present if you need some alone time. If I’m not mistaken, you’ll never be disturbed if you’re inside the tent.” Sirius laughed as he wiggled his eyebrows meaningfully. Harry shot a side-glance at his in-laws and was relieved to find that they were occupied with other things to overhear Sirius’s clarification. Hermione looked thoughtful for a moment. She was curious how different Magical tents were from Muggle tents.

“Thanks, Daph.” Harry called out, reddening a bit as he put their Christmas present aside.

Oswald and Felicia had given him a new set of Quidditch armour. Unlike the armours they saw on the market, this armour was soft. Oswald explained that he created this type of armour after watching

Harry play because he realised that students needed protective gear that could spread out the shock so to minimize bruising.

The Weasleys and the Potters were surprised to receive presents from Mrs. Weasley. It was the usual: the traditional monogrammed Weasley Jumpers and a box of pastries. There was a note of apology included with the parcel for Harry and Hermione. They brightened up when they realised that Ginny was going to be discharged soon and would be returning to Hogwarts. The Weasley twins grew contemplative for a moment as they stared at their bright red hand-knitted jumpers. Remus clapped them warmly on their backs as he smiled. "No matter what she might have done, she's still your mother and you two are still her sons. She'd naturally still care about you." Fred and George grinned appreciatively back at him before heading upstairs to jot a note of thanks for their mother.

"There's mistletoe above you, Harry and Hermione." Sirius remarked in mock surprise as he pointed to the large bough of mistletoe floating above them. Harry began to regret allowing his godfather to put up the mistletoe. He noted that he was sitting a distance away from Amelia.

"You've got to kiss properly to escape from the Mistletoe. It's attracted to people who are in love with one another." Sirius prompted as he grinned impishly. Harry shot a glare at Sirius and looked at Hermione.

Dad's going to kill me. Harry thought as he leaned in. The corners of her lips curled up in amusement.

No, he won't. You're just kissing your wife. I'd have to kill you if you had to kiss another girl. Hermione answered. It caused Harry to chuckle gently. He cupped her face lightly so that their gazes would meet. He brushed his lips across her tentatively.

A proper kiss, my love. Hermione commented. She burrowed her slim fingers into his messy black hair as their lips met in a searing kiss. His arms tightened around her passionately, pressing her petite body

to him as he responded in equal zeal. It was moments later when Hermione pulled back to get air. A smile graced her lips when she saw that the mistletoe floating above their heads had disappeared. Harry was still in daze from the kiss.

“Do you need to go out to cool down?” Sirius teased. The young couple shook their head and beamed. Harry was conscious of the way Dan was trying to hide his dislike for their public display of affection.

“Happy Christmas, my lord. I’m sorry to interrupt, but there is a Miss Chang at the door, and she wishes to join you.” Dobby announced as he bowed.

“Merry Christmas, Dobby. Do you like your present?” Harry asked cordially.

The house elf beamed brightly. “Thank you, my Lord. I love the socks. The rest of the house elves also want to express their gratitude for the extended leave and the bonuses we received.”

A smile graced his lips. “It was well deserved. You all work so hard to make sure that we’re well taken care of. We should be thanking all of you for the excellent work you’ve done,” replied Harry sincerely. “By the way, you may bring Miss Chang in.” He added. Dobby nodded and left to fetch the girl.

Cho Chang appeared a moment later. They understood why Daphne commented that Cho would be a good match for Cedric, at least physically. Cho Chang was a pretty and slim girl with long, straight black hair. When Cedric stood by her side and introduced her to the rest of the occupants in the room, everyone thought they looked good together, but it was clear that Cedric treated her nothing more than a friend.

She politely greeted the adults in the room. George and Fred were staring at Cho as they walked down the stairs to the living room. Neville, Susan, and Astoria tried their best not to look affronted. They

didn't like the girl because she didn't stand up for their friend when she was supposed to.

To their surprise, Cho offered a sincere apology to Luna for not standing up for her. There was a look of genuine surprise on everyone's face- they didn't expect an apology from her. Cho had expected that she would be disliked and scarcely expected to be forgiven or be treated nicely. Her apology was a good step in changing their opinions of her and they began to treat her better.

It had stopped snowing, so as promised they headed to the Quidditch pitch to play a friendly match after placing a warming spell on them. They sorted themselves into two teams and picked a colour to represent them. Harry, Hermione, Daphne, Astoria, Fred, George and Oswald were on one team while Cho, Cedric, Luna, Susan, Neville, Sirius and Lupin were on the other. It made it fair since there were three experienced Quidditch players on both sides. Oswald decided to charm their winter attire black while the other team picked white. They creatively called themselves Yin and Yang.

They agreed that the seekers were not allowed to play their usual positions to ensure fairness. However, the Weasley twins were allowed to keep their positions because they would be able to handle the Bludgers the best. Astoria and Luna played seekers. Harry, Hermione and Daphne played chasers for Yin while Cho, Cedric, and Susan played the same for Yang. The Weasley twins and the two Marauders played beaters. Oswald and Neville were the keepers.

Felicia and Amelia gave the Grangers a brief overview of the game as they led them to the stands surrounding the pitch. They were excited since it was the first time they'd ever watched a Quidditch game. They conjured warm drinks as they waited for the game to begin.

Harry, Hermione, and the Weasley twins used their own brooms while the rest settled for the Nimbus 2001 broomsticks that Dobby had bought. They were flying around the pitch, trying to adapt to the feeling of flying. The spectators could tell who the school team seekers were. Cedric, Harry, and Cho were looking very comfortable on their brooms as they did all sort of crazy moves in the air for fun.

The three of them had a blast trying to tag each other in the air. Harry pressed himself into a dive, pulling up at the last second before he hit the ground. Cedric and Cho naturally backed off since they lacked the Gryffindor daring.

“Do they use those moves in the game?” Jean asked anxiously. Her heart nearly leapt out when she watched Harry fly so wildly.

Amelia nodded. “Harry’s a natural on the broom. I’ve heard him pull off far more dangerous moves.” She told them about the incident when a mad Bludger was chasing after him. Hermione also looked rather comfortable on her broom since she went through lessons on battling in air. Luna, Astoria, and Neville looked rather shaky on their brooms.

Hagrid was acting as the referee for this friendly match. When they all settled back down on the land, he gave the signal to mount their brooms. He did a countdown and when he blew the whistle, everyone shot up into air. Hagrid tossed the Quaffle into the air and the other balls shot out of the box. The snitch disappeared at once.

Harry and Cho dived at the same time as they tried to catch the Quaffle but Harry got it first and he neatly passed it to Hermione who was speeding past him. Daphne flanked her side as they made their way towards the goal. Neville grew nervous at the way Hermione was coming straight at him, dodging the fruitless attempts Sirius and Lupin made to disarm her of the Quaffle. Without hesitation, she made a sharp swerve to the right as she tossed the Quaffle into the left hoop. Neville, who thought she was tossing it into the middle or the right hoop, dived in that direction. The Yin scored first! Hermione and Daphne high-fived each other when she headed towards her.

“Way to go!” Harry called as he clapped.

The Grangers were amazed at the speed of the game.

“It seems that there are a lot of hidden Quidditch talent in this group. They are scoring really fast.” Amelia commented as she trained her eyes on them.

The seekers were still prowling around in the air, searching for the elusive golden ball while keeping an eye on the game.

Neville passed the Quaffle to Cedric as he shot like a bullet through the crowd. He neatly dodged all the incoming Bludgers and Harry's attempts to knock him off his broom. He passed the Quaffle to Cho when he realised that Yin Chasers were circling him and that the Weasley twins were using the pinball tactic. Harry was reluctant to knock her off her broom, giving her an opportunity to make an attempt at the goal. Cho changed her direction at the last minute when Oswald dived and threw the Quaffle into the unguarded hoop, levelling the score. She was grinning from ear to ear as she high-fived Cedric.

The game continued and the Yin scored another point, taking the lead once more.

"Yes!" Harry pumped his arm as he beamed and did a sloth grip to avoid being hit by the Bludger.

Neville tossed the Quaffle to Cho. She wisely passed the Quaffle to Susan since no one was guarding her. She sped towards Yin's goal. However, Fred had knocked the Quaffle off her hands with a timely swing of his bat. The motion caused the Quaffle to land in Daphne's hands. However, Daphne was in a bad position. The Yang team surrounded her. Cho knocked the Quaffle out of her hands and took possession of the red ball. Sirius knocked the Bludger aimed at Cho towards Hermione who was speeding towards Cho.

She dodged the small black ball when she did a turn.

Daphne pursed Cho as she attempted to take possession of the Quaffle while dodging an incoming Bludger. Cho, knowing that she couldn't keep possession of the red ball, tossed it to Cedric. However, Harry suddenly dived down and intercepted the pass. He pulled up suddenly as he sped straight toward Neville and made his first attempt at the goal. The Quaffle made a graceful descent through the hoop.

The Yin cheered loudly.

The three seekers used all the skills they had to keep or take possession of the red ball. Amelia had to admit it was funny game to see the Chasers doing a better job at wild aerial tricks than the seekers who were flying absently above the game, searching for the Snitch.

The Yin was two hundred points ahead of the Yang because of the spectacular team play of the three Yin chasers and the two beaters. The Yang players were good in their own right but they lack the teamwork that the Yin team had displayed.

The Yang Chasers were inching close to the goals when Daphne shot past and knocked Cho off the broom. The impact made her drop the Quaffle into Hermione's hands as she scrambled back on her broom. Hermione shot straight past them and passed the Quaffle to Harry who was lingering near the opposite goal. He changed his tactic at the last minute, ducking the Bludger and passing the Quaffle to Daphne who made the goal.

The Quaffle was back into play. Susan took possession of the red ball and made a pass to Cho. However, Daphne dived dangerously close to Cho in her attempt to take possession of the Quaffle. Before Daphne could lay her hands on the Quaffle, Cho knocked her off her broom. Daphne was hanging precariously on her broom as the Bludger made its way towards her.

"Daph!" Cedric shouted as he shot up. The Four beaters sped to try to knock the Bludger out of the way. However, they were too late. The Bludger hit the broom with a loud crunch and Daphne fell.

"No!" Cedric shouted as he flattened himself into the broom and a dived to catch her.

Harry and Hermione immediately whipped out their wands and cast the spell to slow down her fall.

Cedric never felt so anxious. He waited until he was safely below her before halting his broom, so that Daphne would fall right into his arms.

Daphne was surprised when she felt a strong pair of arms holding her tight. She heard him expel a sigh of relief. "Thank Merlin, you're alright." He said worriedly as he looked at her intently. Daphne sharply sucked in her breath when she looked into his eyes. She took in the spicy scent of his skin and noticed for the first time how utterly good looking he was.

Their eyes were locked on each other. A breath of air lived between them as they looked into each other's eyes. Her heart began pounding faster.

"Thanks," she stammered.

Suddenly, a small smile graced his face as he idly swept the blonde hair away from her face and placed her in front of him as if she weighed nothing. He slid backward, giving Daphne more space and wrapped his arm loosely around her waist.

"Hang on, we need to land." Cedric answered. His warm breath on her ear made her shiver involuntarily. She knew that it was unintentional, but she never felt so conscious of him. Daphne wordlessly did as she was told as she tried to figure out the change in her feelings as they touched ground.

The game ended suddenly when Luna caught the snitch by surprise. The snitch appeared right next to her and she easily reached out and caught the snitch. She calmly raised the golden snitch into the air.

"Yang catches the snitch but Yin wins!" Hagrid growled as everyone began to cheer. Yin beat Yang by 20 points.

"That was an amazing game." Harry commented. "Nice catch." Harry winked at Cedric.

Cedric blushed. "I know you cast a spell to slow her down." Harry summoned Daphne's broom to him as the rest landed excitedly on the ground.

Cho landed next to Cedric. She looked at Daphne bitterly when she noticed that she was still in Cedric's arms. There was no doubt from the way Cedric looked at Daphne that he liked her. The rest were oblivious as they happily recounted the details of the game and clapped each other on the back in a friendly manner. Harry was glad that there were no injuries despite the fact that amateurs filled the ranks of the teams.

"It was strange, just as I was about to head to the ground to check on Daph, the snitch flew into sight so I caught it." Luna answered. Everyone burst into laughter at the strange way the game had ended.

Neville shared his amazement with Hermione about her skills and was surprised that she didn't consider joining the Quidditch team.

"With the chasers we have now? I don't think I'm good enough to replace them. As you can see, it's important that the chasers can work well together." Hermione answered.

"Yes, Cho and Cedric's skills are far superior compared to Daph's and Hermione's. However, we couldn't beat you because the three of you worked really well together. When we tried to knock you off the broom, the other two were there to defend." Susan commented.

It was clear that everyone enjoyed the game and they promised to do it again soon.

After leaving the pitch, they had a light lunch, knowing that the elves were planning a big, traditional Christmas dinner. The group sat for a bit discussing in detail the highlights of the game as they complimented one another. They headed back to their rooms for a bath after their meal.

When Harry entered his room, he was surprised to find an unopened present sitting on his bed. The house elves had apparently made a

delivery. He unwrapped the present, revealing a journal and a note. He read the note and realised that it was a gift from Sirius and Remus. They had offered to teach Hermione and him to transform into Animagi as a Christmas present. His eyes widened. It was illegal to become an Animagus without informing the Ministry but the idea appealed to him.

Hermione took that moment to appear in his room. She noticed the grin on his face and stopped to look at the note he was holding in his hands.

She arched her eyebrows in surprise when she realised that Sirius and Lupin were helping them to become Animagi as a Christmas present.

“This will be very useful since most of your enemies are expecting a boy.” Hermione smiled happily. “It’s a wonderful Christmas gift.” Harry called his godfather on his watch and expressed his gratitude while Hermione went for a bath.

“Moony tells me that you two will be very busy. We can probably only guide you through the first and the final steps. The rest is really looking inside yourself to find your form. We can have our first session tomorrow. I must caution you that it takes a long time before you’re able to transform yourself into the animal.”

“We understand. Thanks, Sirius.” Harry answered.

“I’m sure it’s a skill your father would’ve wanted to teach you. It’s dead useful.” He smiled. He bade goodbye before the image on the screen faded away.

Across the table where Cedric sat with his friends, there was a slight hint of tension in the air. They were having Christmas pudding as they chatted lightly. Hermione had noticed that Cho Chang was being unusually possessive of Cedric, her childhood best friend. Cho would touch Cedric subtly, but clearly sending the message across that Cedric was hers, so keep away. It seemed that her actions were mainly directed at Daphne, since she occasionally sent almost

indiscernible cool glares towards the quiet blonde whenever she had a chance.

If Daphne was annoyed with Cho, her emotions were betrayed only by the faint frosty edge her tone had whenever she spoke. Hermione observed that Daphne deliberately ignored the fifth year. Noting that no one was paying attention to them because they were all engrossed in their own conversations, Hermione leaned towards Daphne and whispered, "Would you relax? You're looking as if you're jealous of their closeness."

Daphne rolled her eyes at her remarks. "I'm not jealous. I'm annoyed. She keeps sending these smirks in my direction whenever she gets close to Cedric as if it should matter to me. Shouldn't she be worried about Susan who always talks about him in glowing terms?" She retorted in a slightly grumpy tone. "Am I really a threat to their relationship?" She demanded in a furious whisper as she gazed at her.

"She definitely thinks you're a threat and from where I am sitting, her fears aren't baseless. By the way, I think Susan's over that phase." Hermione replied quietly.

Daphne's brows drew into a line at Hermione's suggestion but said nothing. Cedric raised his brows enquiringly when he saw the frown on Daphne's face.

"Is something wrong, Daph?" He enquired with concern. Their eyes met in a brief moment. It was a déjà vu. It reminded her of the two times he held her in his arms. Cedric was looking at her the same way he did then, as if she was his whole world.

The fog in her head began to clear as she started to connect the dots and realisation finally dawned on her. The conclusion made her swallow visibly as she averted her eyes.

"I'm alright." Daphne answered in a tight voice as she stood up suddenly. "Please excuse me for a moment." She said as she walked out of the dining room.

Cedric stood up, much to the chagrin of his childhood friend, and followed Daphne. The exit of the two teenagers made the adults at the table look at them briefly with concern. Satisfied that everything was all right, they resumed their conversations.

Daphne walked towards the foyer where the towering Christmas tree stood regally in the middle. All she knew was that she needed some space to figure things out. Resting her head in her arms, she stared into the fire. Her sister had correctly pointed out that she had never cared about the feelings of other guys until Cedric came along.

Why was he different? Daphne knew it was an answer she did not want to dwell on at the moment.

How was she going to treat him? She pondered as she rubbed the temples of her head. It was clear that she couldn't ignore his feelings for her, nor hers for him.

"Daph, are you alright?" Cedric gently asked as he cautiously approached her. Daphne hastily masked her emotions so that she would appear emotionless.

"Yes, I'm fine." Daphne answered coolly. His brows furrowed at her frosty tone as he searched her face.

"I thought we're over that?" Cedric questioned dispassionately as he halted in his approach. He didn't like the tone.

"I made a mistake." Daphne began as she stood up, spun around and look at him at the eye. There was no wavering of emotions in her eyes.

"A mistake?" He echoed sceptically as he stared at her. Daphne approached him slowly, without breaking their eye contact.

"Absolutely," answered Daphne harshly. "I shouldn't have given you reason to think that you stood a chance with me. I know you like me. It has to end or we'll never be friends."

His grey eyes darkened in anger. "Why?" he growled as he took a menacing step closer to her. "Give me a good reason why. It's not because I'm affecting you, is it? There's no way I'm making your heart race, right?" He fired as he closed the gap between them.

Cedric towered over her, casting a shadow over Daphne, as their faces were only inches apart. Daphne stared at him defiantly as if daring him to do his worst. The look of fury was suddenly replaced by tenderness and it made Daphne drop her guard slightly.

Cedric lovingly framed her face with his hands as he searched her eyes. "You got it all wrong, Daph. I don't simply want to be just your friend and I don't simply like you. I like Cho, Hermione, Susan, and Luna. 'Like' is simply too mild a term for the feelings I have for you. " Cedric whispered huskily as he stroked her cheek gently.

Daphne didn't expect that he would confess his feelings for her and it took her by surprise. It was different from the other confessions she had heard. This was truly heartfelt.

Forced to confront her feelings for him, she couldn't discount the fact she felt something for him - her heart was racing from the closeness.

"What about Cho?" She questioned in her weak attempt to change his mind. "It's clear that your parents want her to be your partner."

Cedric ignored her question and addressed the main issue. "I know you're afraid." He said confidently as he tipped her chin so that he could look into those clear blue eyes. A timid smile crossed his face briefly. "I am too. This is all new to me. I know that there's just something special between us. Why don't we try and see where it will lead?" He implored hopefully.

She gave him a hard shove to create some distance – his closeness was not allowing her to think clearly. "We've barely know each other for less than a year..."

“That’s what dating all about. It’s getting to know each other better.” Cedric argued as he stared at her. “I don’t really care what my parents think. I believe I have the right to choose the person I want to wake up to for the rest of my life. There have been many times when we’ve talked that I’ve sense the bleakness of the situation from the frosty way you treat me. During those times, I really hoped I could wish my feelings away but I can’t. It didn’t help that I was always hoping that it was you whom I was going to Hogsmeade with instead of Cho.”

After a moment of silence, Cedric went on confidently, “Daph, I promise I will treat you right if you would just let me.” He moved closer to her.

Daphne, trying to figure a suitable response, glanced up. To her astonishment, there was the mistletoe was floating above them.

She recalled Sirius’ words.

“It’s attracted to people who are in love with one another.”

It was as if all the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle had finally fallen into place. She wasn’t merely attracted to him; she was falling in love with him.

Cedric looked up and saw the floating mistletoe. A delighted smile crept onto his face. “I guess I’ll have to kiss you properly if we ever hope to get rid of the mistletoe.” He said huskily as he leaned in.

His lips tentatively brushed across her lips. Seeing that Daphne had closed her eyes and allowed him to kiss her, he wrapped his arms around her and applied a bit more pressure on her lips. She responded hesitantly, wrapping her arms around his neck as he gently kissed her on the corner of her lips before fusing their lips again in a sweet kiss.

It turned out that the kiss was good enough to make the mistletoe disappear.

When their lips parted, Cedric was beaming like a Cheshire cat as he gazed into her beautiful eyes. "Does this mean we're together?" Cedric asked hopefully.

A smile of amusement graced her usually emotionless face as she looked at him. She nodded wordlessly.

Cedric gave a cheer, lifted her in the air and spun her around before setting her on her feet. They didn't see the emerald eyes in the dark.

About time, Katrina thought as she stood up and went upstairs. She thought of persuading Crookshanks to head outside for a hunt. With that thought in mind, she slipped upstairs.

A/N: Hi, everyone. I hope that you'd a good week. Thank you for taking the time to review the last chapter. The next chapter will mark the completion of their third year. I don't wanna drag third year any longer (It'll be the 22nd chapter) because I've finished with the main plots of this year. What do you think about having the finals of the Quidditch Season in next chapter? Have a great week.

Chapter 22

Beta read by Frustr8dwriter

A few days after Christmas and after the adults returned to work, Daphne took the opportunity to inform their friends that she and Cedric were officially together. She was amazed when everyone was ecstatic and congratulated them heartily with hugs. She couldn't believe that all her close friends were not surprised that they were now an item since months ago she'd harboured such a dislike for Cedric. Their whole relationship dance apparently sparked an interest among her friends since it was clear that up until Christmas, Daphne was still clueless about her attraction to Cedric. The girls excitedly pulled her aside and grilled her. Susan and Astoria took the roles of the interrogator as they fired question after question until they had the whole story. To their surprise, they found out that it was the mistletoe that made her realise her true feelings for him.

No one complained when they added lessons in hand-to-hand combat after their daily runs and Occlumency lessons. Daphne and Susan pointed out the many benefits of learning the art of self-defence. It would keep them on form and it would be a good skill to have in order to protect themselves from harm. The sessions took up most of their afternoons but what they learned turned out to be interesting and enjoyable. They took a holistic approach to the art of hand-to-hand combat, learning the psychological aspects of fighting as well as several other theory lessons instead of merely imparting the necessary skills. They were also taught some basic muscle training and simple moves.

The teenagers usually spent the rest of the day playing a watered down version of Quidditch or using the Non-magical entertainment wing. The experience of watching movies was something the teenagers enjoyed very much, just like the adults. Together, they finished watching the two other instalments of Star Wars. The movie piqued their interest in space. It was a startling discovery for those raised in the Magical World to know that man had travelled to the

moon. They were disappointed to learn that humans hadn't achieved the level of technology that would allow a tie-fighter war in space.

One of their favourites was *The Addams Family* - a macabre but hilarious movie. The tight-knit family was strange but very rich, and they lived in a large mansion with a dungeon. They couldn't help liking one of the characters, the daughter Wednesday Addams, and her deadpan wit. After watching the movie, the catchy theme song got stuck in their heads for a while. Whenever any of them caught another subconsciously humming the theme song, the others would snap their fingers twice at the right moments. The magical adults were astounded by this apparently well-rehearsed move the first time it happened. They watched the movie themselves and understood what the kids were up to.

The entire group celebrated the New Year together, but all too soon it was the end of their two-week holiday and they found themselves back on board the Hogwarts Express.

For once, Harry dreaded going back to the place that up until the last year, he considered home. His stomach sank at the thought of not seeing the three other Heads of the Ancient Houses in the evenings when they returned from work or spending quality time with them. He could see that he wasn't going to be the only one missing all that had happened over the Christmas holiday. No one was in the mood to chat in the train.

Harry let out a sigh. It was time to focus back on his schoolwork since he had O. coming up. He was not surprised when Hermione quietly handed him a detailed study plan, much to the chagrin of the two fifth-years who'd witnessed the exchange, and it sparked the first conversation in the compartment.

"You're the top two students in your year. I can't believe that you're going to start studying the moment we get back to school." Fred grumbled good-naturally.

"Don't you think you ought to study just as much as us? You're taking your O.W.L.s this year." Hermione quipped as she frowned

slightly. George was about to retort when he wisely held his tongue and turned away. The Weasley twins knew better to offend Hermione. The other occupants of the compartment sniggered at the sight.

Ginny turned up in their compartment during the trip. Naturally, all the Gryffindors were delighted to see her back and bubbly. Hermione greeted her warmly after her twin brothers gave her a bear hug. It was a little awkward since Hermione would usually greet the girl with her famous bone-crushing hug. Ginny knew that this was the best she could hope for and apologised profusely for what happened that fateful night. Neville smiled shyly as he waved at her. When it was Harry's turn, there was an awkward silence.

"You're an amazing guy. It's difficult not to like you but you and Hermione make a good couple." She said as she nervously shifted her weight.

He nodded. "It's nice to have you back, Gin." Harry said with a cordial smile.

Ginny lingered in their compartment for a few moments before returning to her own. The Weasley twins had accompanied her to meet the rest of their brothers.

Hermione was bemused when they noticed Crookshanks and Katrina getting along. It was the first time since leaving Potter Mansion that they'd seen the two pets together. It seemed that the time spent in the Potter Mansion after the playground incident allowed the two loggerheads get to know each other in a fresh new way. Hermione glanced at the empty seat beside Daphne before looking pointedly at her. As usual, her face betrayed none of her emotions. Cedric was absent because he needed to speak to Cho.

It was not difficult to find Cho. She was sitting with her girlfriends, giggling lightly at some joke that they had shared. When Cedric entered the compartment and asked if he could speak to her privately, her girlfriends shot her knowing winks before leaving the compartment. Cho frowned slightly, seeing that Cedric was looking quite ill at ease, but there was still an amused gleam in her eyes.

As soon as they were finally alone, Cho began sweetly, "I'm sorry, Ced. They like to tease. They think that we're going to be an item pretty soon." Cho's cheeks reddened slightly with her explanation. She sounded a little too hopeful.

He rubbed his neck nervously as he averted his glance. This was going to be much harder than he anticipated. He began to try to figure out how to broach the subject.

"So what did you want to talk to me about?" Cho asked curiously, distracting him from his thoughts. She looked at him thoughtfully, waiting patiently for him to speak.

He drew a long breath before looking at her. "I'm afraid your friends will be disappointed." Cedric answered solemnly. "I wanted to tell you before you heard it from anyone else. Daphne and I got together over the holidays."

As the words sank in, the smile on her face faded.

"You and Daphne are together now?" She echoed tonelessly. An uncomfortable silence fell between them.

He rubbed his neck furiously. "Um... yes."

Her eyes darkened. "So how do you expect me to react? Do you want me to congratulate you?" She spat as she glared at him. "What about us?" The venom in her eyes made his face grow tight as he tried to make her see reason.

"Cho, you must know that there was never an 'us'. Things simply just didn't work out when we gave it a go," Cedric answered in deep frustration. "There's no question that I like you but not in the romantic sense. We've been friends for as long as I can remember."

"It's because you never really gave us a chance. If Greengrass was out of the picture, you'd realise that things can work out." Cho retorted angrily. "We've always got along well, I'm sure with time we'd have feelings for each other."

He shook his head as his brows drew into a line. "I knew things weren't going to work out after we'd gone out several times. However, my dad was insistent that I keep trying. I realised that was a mistake. I shouldn't have tried to placate him by going out with you. I'm sorry if I led you to believe that we could be anything more than just friends." Cedric answered sincerely.

Her eyes narrowed. It was clear that she couldn't accept the truth.

"No, it can't be true." She concluded softly as she searched his face for some signs that he was pulling her leg. "No, you've got to be kidding me. What do you even see in her anyway? What does she have that I don't?" She demanded agitatedly. "Don't you know that I've liked you since my third year? Can you see how right we'd be together? Even your parents will be happy if we're together. I can pretend that this whole thing never happened and not breathe a word to your father if you break up with her."

His eyes hardened at her response. "I've thought this over long and hard – and I made my decision long before I ever confessed my feelings to Daph. I'm not going to let anyone tell me whom I should be with. I'm in love with Daphne and I want to be with her. No one can convince me otherwise." Cedric answered in a firm tone as he stood up. In a gentle tone, "We'd never be happy if we ended up together. Cho, you're a wonderful girl and you deserve someone who will do anything to make you happy. I just hope that one day we can be friends again." He concluded as he walked out of the compartment.

Her excited girlfriends dashed into the compartment, hoping to extract some good news but they were surprised to see Cho upset.

It was clear what the outcome of the conversation was when Cedric walked into the compartment with a troubled expression. He took his seat quietly, his face rock-hard. There was a lack of the familiar twinkle in his eyes. Daphne reached over and took his hand, forcing him to look at her. He gave his girlfriend a weak smile when she gave his hand a squeeze.

“I’m sure it’ll all work out in the end. She just needs time to accept it.” Daphne remarked.

There was an awkward silence in the compartment since no one knew what to say to cheer him up.

“It’s going to be an exciting term for both of you. It’ll take the school by a storm once it gets out that you’re together. I think Daphne now wishes she’d kept the bag she gave Hermione for her birthday.” Susan teased.

Those who were present at Hermione’s birthday party sniggered. Cedric gave them a perplexed look as his eyes fell upon Hermione’s fashionable dragon-hide bag.

Imitating Daphne’s deadpan look and voice, Susan continued, “It’s a dragon-hide bag. It is charmed to be indestructible, weightless, and bottomless. It’ll defend you from spells thrown at your back by jealous fan girls.” There was an amused smile on Cedric’s face as he looked at his girlfriend. She was silent but Cedric knew that she was equally amused for he could see the mirth in her eyes. Their friends clutched their stomachs as they all roared in laughter. Cedric wrapped his arms around her waist and smiled at her. They chatted lightly for the rest of their journey.

It seemed that Susan’s prediction had come true; the sight of Daphne and Cedric walking into the hall hand in hand caught everyone’s attention. All eyes were fixed upon as the new couple made their way to their seats with all their friends.

Harry and Hermione exchanged smiles when they discovered that they weren’t in the limelight for once. Harry remembered the first time when he and Hermione entered the hall as a couple, Hermione was squirming by his side. Hermione was no longer uncomfortable in the spotlight, but he knew that she still didn’t like it. The change in Hermione made Harry feel warm inside. He smiled lovingly at his wife as he realised all the effort Hermione had to make in order to be with him. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

Daphne and Cedric appeared to be more at ease since they were already accustomed to the interest the other students had in them. Astoria flashed them a thumbs-up as they walked past her. Cedric was escorting Daphne to her seat at the end of the Slytherin table with her close Slytherin friends. Cedric imitated Harry's actions and drew the chair out for his girlfriend and giving her a peck on the cheek before leaving with Susan to join his fellow housemates at the Hufflepuff table.

It was amusing to watch the Hufflepuffs good-naturedly slapping Cedric's back, congratulating him for finally getting a girlfriend. Cedric was grinning to ear to ear as he accepted their well wishes. No one tried to harass the Ice Queen for details but the boys in her house seemed to lament the loss of a target to pursue.

The Ravenclaws didn't take the news too well since they expected Cho and Cedric to together eventually. Since many had already seen Cedric and Cho together, it was believed that Daphne had snatched Cho's boyfriend away. Cho's reaction did nothing to halt the spread of rumours. In fact, it made them worse.

Cho immediately told the Diggorys that he was dating Daphne. Amos didn't take the news too well as was expected. He sent a howler the very next day, berating him for his poor choice, picking a girl he knew less than a year over one that he knew almost all his life, and demanded that he to correct his mistake. The howler exploded in the Great Hall embarrassing the Hufflepuff. However, it didn't dissuade him from being with Daphne. Cedric replied that he was certain of his decision and pleaded for his father's acceptance. There were a few heated letters over the week and the incident caused a rift between them.

The Ravenclaws took action, treating Daphne badly whenever they had a chance. In fact, Cedric was surprised that Daphne didn't seem to mind the nasty comments the Ravenclaws made about her. All her friends discovered that when Daphne made up her mind and wanted to commit herself to anything, it took a great deal to discourage her. Daphne was resolved not bow down to pressure and continued to be seen in public with Cedric.

Harry and his friends naturally supported her and defended her.

“Enough is enough.” Susan declared suddenly one evening when she overheard a Ravenclaw making more spiteful remarks about Daphne. They were in the Great Hall, taking their dinner. Daphne arched her brows in surprise.

In a voice loud enough for everyone in the Hall to hear, she said, “Daphne, do you know that as a Scion of reputable house, especially an Ancient and Noble one, you have the right to demand for satisfaction if someone chooses to tarnish your reputation by slandering you? It’s considered slander if one is unable to provide sufficient evidence to back up a claim made against you and the statement has an effect of sullyng your name.” She stood up and looked pointedly at the Ravenclaw table. “May I ask if anyone here has any proof to back up the rumours the Ravenclaws have been spreading about Daphne Greengrass?” Susan went on to remind them of the legal implications. When none of the Ravenclaws could look her in the eye, she said, “Yeah, I didn’t think so.” She shot a dirty look at Cho before sitting down.

She was greeted with expressions of surprise.

“Didn’t think you had a temper but that was a good speech.” Fred commented with a smile.

Her face turned red at his compliment. “I was just tired of all of it. Someone has to say something because Daph’s done nothing wrong.”

Harry chuckled as he commented. “Fellow Gryffindors, I think we’re a bad influence on our friends.”

Things soon died down as January rolled over to February. The Grangers informed them that in their absence, Joe Warren and his friends had filed a police report against Harry for assault. The Grangers called to find out exactly what had transpired between them. Harry took the following Saturday off to submit his statement to the police. Since Joe Warren and his friends’ records weren’t clean and

there were witnesses who corroborate that Harry acted in self-defence, all charges were dropped.

On the brighter note, the Gryffindors played against the Ravenclaws in an intense match at the start of February. The Ravenclaws put it all on the line but they were still defeated by the Gryffindors. During the match, Oliver Wood was shouting at Harry to lose his manners when he noticed Harry's reluctance to knock Cho off her broom, much to the amusement of the spectators. Cho kept flying into his path whenever he made attempts to dive, effectively blocking him. If he didn't have a reputation for having close female friends and treating them with the utmost respect, most would have reckoned that he had a motive for being so nice to her. However, he did manage to catch the snitch without having to knock her off the broom. It was an astounding victory for the Gryffindors and they partied through the night. This time Harry did joined in the celebration.

The Quidditch finals were set for after their Easter holiday.

There was also another special occasion that took in February. Harry and Cedric were showing outwards signs of jitters as Valentine's Day quickly approached. Between their school workload, extra lessons, and Quidditch practices, there wasn't much time to prepare for the occasion. Hermione and Harry decided collectively not to put too much effort in preparing for the occasion – they just wanted to spend some time alone together.

It was the morning of fourteen of February, Hermione awakened alone for the first time since she and Harry began sharing a bed. A frown briefly crossed her face as she pushed the stray hairs behind her ears. She detected a faint scent of roses and looked around hastily. She was surprised to find the bedroom adorned with mixture of red, white, deep pink, and pale pink roses. A smile appeared on her face as she stood up to look at the extravagant floral display. They were in clusters of four, one of each colour. There was a small handmade Valentine's Day card on the side table. Accompanying it was a cluster of three roses.

Didn't we agree that we wouldn't spend do much for Valentine's Day? She thought with a smile as she picked up the card and read it.

Dear Mione,

I know we agreed that we wouldn't do anything extravagant but I wanted to show you just how much you mean to me. A hundred roses signify my undying love for you. I love that we're united in a very special way – I can't imagine a life without you. You make me so very happy. I cherish each and every moment I spend with you. Thank you for simply being you. Happy Valentine's Day.

I love you.

HJP

Her eyes were moist when she finished reading the short note. It was simple but it communicated his feelings clearly. She hurriedly gathered her clothes and headed into the bathroom.

Harry sat at the Gryffindor table, with his chin resting on his knuckles and absentmindedly drummed his fingers on the table. Susan smiled, knowing what was bothering him this particular morning. "I'm sure she'll love anything that you do for her." She assured. "I'm surprised that you've picked a single purple rose instead of red rose."

He stared at the royal purple rose on the table and grinned.

"Purple roses means enchantment - I fell in love with her at first sight. Yet this attraction is not fleeting because purple roses also mean permanence. My feelings towards her will remain unchanged." Harry replied. "So what do you think about this choice of rose?"

There was a dreamy expression on her face. "Perfect choice – how romantic."

"I really hope so." Harry said as he shoved his hands into his pocket. He was surprised when he found a slip of pretty paper; he took it out and read it.

If I could reach up and hold a star for every time you've made me smile, the entire evening sky would be in the palm of my hand. Happy Valentine's Day.

He grinned from ear to ear. He could recognise Hermione's neat handwriting anywhere. He opened his bag to put away the short note. He had a feeling that he would find these messages turn up in the most unlikely places. Soon, he found another message in the pocket of his bag.

I love you, not for what you are, but for what I am when I'm with you.

A few moments later, Hermione came walking into the Great Hall with a smile plastered on her face. Harry walked up with the single purple rose in his hand.

"Happy Valentine's Day, my love." Harry said as he offered the last rose. She raised her eyebrows enquiringly as she took the rose from him.

"This is the hundredth rose." He answered with a wide smile. It was clear that she was so excited to see him that she didn't notice there was a rose missing. "I was captivated the first time I met you and know that the feelings I had then has never changed and will never change."

"Thank you, sweetheart. This is simply wonderful." She answered emotionally as she took the rose and pulled him closer for a kiss. Harry was grinning from ear to ear when he escorted his wife to join their friends.

Daphne was looking forward to that evening so that she could spend some time with her boyfriend. Since they were in different years, their timetables did not match. Nights were usually the only times they could meet up. She was about to enter the classroom of her first lesson, Transfiguration, when Hermione stopped her and gave her a red rose with a note attached to it. It was from Cedric.

She smiled when she read the message he had written for her. Daphne was delighted when she received a rose at each lesson. Cedric had selected different friends to deliver a rose to her. At the end of the day, she'd received six red roses. It only heightened her desire to see the person who'd made the day so special for her. Before she saw him, she needed to get his Valentine's Day gift ready.

Daphne and Cedric were given the use of Harry and Hermione's quarters in order to have a private dinner for Valentine's Day. Dobby was tasked to assist Daphne with making the meal since Harry knew that Daphne had never attempted to cook a meal before. She decorated the room nicely, lit some candles, and played soft music in the background to enhance the ambience.

When Harry returned from Quidditch practice, he was surprised to see that their bedroom was empty. There was a large decorative jar sitting on the bedside table. He withdrew all the messages from his bag and placed them into the jar with a smile. He then noticed a suit of white tuxedo laid out on the bed for him. There was a note attached.

Meet me in the House in this.

HJP

With a wide grin on his face, he took the clothes and headed into the bathroom.

Harry appeared as the white glowing light faded. He nonchalantly brushed the dust from his white jacket and straightened himself up. He double-checked his appearance, straightening the creases on the jacket and matching trousers. The whole place was bathed in a tangerine glow as the sun sank behind the forest. He wondered if he should shift to Hermione's side to save him all the trouble of finding her. As he was trying to decide what he should do, he finally noticed her.

She was sitting at the round glass table in the middle of the garden, idly sipping from her glass. He noticed that she had also dressed for the occasion. Her long bushy hair was swept behind her head in an

elegant knot and she wore a crimson dress with a low draped neckline.

A smile graced his face as he joined her.

Her eyes swept over him as she took in his appearance and the corners of her lips lifted. His eyes flashed appreciation as they fixed upon her. She grew slightly self-conscious from the way he was watching her so intently. "Angel, you look amazing tonight." Harry complimented, after drinking her in. He gently took her hand and placed a kiss upon it

"Thanks, You look great yourself." Hermione returned with a blush.

It was only when he sat down that he noticed the spread on the table. "Wow," remarked Harry. "Dinner looks fantastic but I distinctly remember that we agreed to keep Valentine Day simple." Harry shot a cheeky grin in her direction.

"Well, I don't consider the hundred roses you gave me, simple." Hermione replied. "I know you're hungry, so let's dig in."

He happily did so. Hermione only prepared dinner on very special occasions since there were always house elves that tended to them. He thanked her for her thoughtful Valentine's Day gift. Her messages were the reason he maintained a smile on his face throughout the day. They contained words of gratitude and love, quotes that best expressed her love for him. Hermione told him that she would send him new notes in occasionally.

"If I made a message jar for you, I think the first message would thank you for putting out the effort to making Valentine's Day so special. I enjoyed my dinner," said Harry when they were finishing their meal.

Hermione raised her eyebrows in surprise. "Valentine Day's not over yet." She answered as she stood up. Harry followed suit, offering his arm to her. They took a quiet stroll along the river as they chatted. It had been a long time since they were able to converse freely.

Cedric's brows arched in surprise when he took in the decorated room. It soon faded away when he saw the girl waiting for him by the large comfortable armchair. For the evening, she decided to wear her hair down and it framed her beautiful face nicely. It was the way she was dressed that made his eyes widen. Her shirt was left unbuttoned at the neck, exposing her defined collarbone. Her long sleeves were rolled up to her elbow and her robes were hung carelessly around the arm of the armchair.

Soft music was playing in the background and her eyes were closed. A perfectly serene smile was on her face and she was completely relaxed. It was a far cry from her usual visage as she was taking lessons in running her family business on top of her regular schoolwork and her extra defence lessons.

"Daph, I'm sorry to keep you waiting." Cedric began. Her eyes fluttered open. They brightened the moment she saw him.

Daphne gracefully climbed to her feet into his arms as he engulfed her in an embrace. "I missed you," whispered Cedric.

"I missed you too." She responded before drawing away. "I loved the flowers – thank you so much. Your gift awaits you. I didn't think you'd appreciate flowers or chocolates so I cooked dinner for you instead. It was my first try though, so I hope it's not too terrible." She replied sheepishly.

The smile on his face broadened. "That's wonderful - I can't wait to try it." They linked hands as Daphne led him to the small dining area. The sight of the slightly overcooked food didn't dampen his enthusiasm – the fact that she took the time to make him a meal warmed his heart. To her amazement, Cedric finished all the food on his plate as he shared his day with her. Cedric stood up and offered a hand to his girlfriend, "Would you honour me with a dance?" He requested with a bright smile.

She allowed him to lead her to the centre of the room. He placed his free hand on her waist as she placed the corresponding hand on his

shoulder and they began to move to the music. It was slightly awkward but Daphne followed his guide unwaveringly.

“You’re doing quite well.” She commented as she allowed him to draw her closer to him.

There was an embarrassed smile on his face. “My skills are a bit rusty. I haven’t danced since I had to take lessons a couple of years back. You’re a good dancer, though.” He complimented.

Her cheeks reddened slightly, “Thank you.” She answered as she laid her head on his chest. They quietly swayed to the music as they enjoyed their closeness.

Shock crossed his face when Harry saw that Hermione was leading him to a shabby tent located near the waterfall. “We can always head to our bedroom if you’re feeling tired, honey. We don’t have to camp outside.” He commented.

There was mirth in her eyes when she looked at him. “Don’t you recognise this tent?” She asked.

A frown ceased his face as he moved closer to the tent to inspect it. He found that it was familiar. A look of comprehension crossed his face when he finally realised that it was the tent they received from Daphne for Christmas.

“It’s really spacious and there’s a hot tub inside. I thought you might to try it with me.” Hermione answered. “Our swim suits are inside.” She continued as she slipped into the tent. Harry followed suit. Soaking and cuddling with each other in the hot tub was a novel experience that Harry and Hermione found they enjoyed.

Both couples loved their Valentine dates.

The two couples turned up at their usual morning training, tired but with silly grins on their faces, causing their other friends to tease them

mercilessly for the next couple of days. It turned out that Valentine was the last time that they could relax. Things began to pick up as Easter approached. The days soon sped past as they focused their attentions on their studies and their private training sessions. Harry and Hermione paid little attention to the happenings of the school as they were usually in the library studying for their major examinations or at the House receiving lessons from Edmund.

With the warmer weather, they mediated out on the grounds at night, with their pets guarding them as they tried to detect the right tokens. It was the second step in becoming Animagi. It was easy to find their centre but it was different trying to get in tune with nature. They didn't have much luck yet in this area but they continued to try it weekly. Their pets would wake them up if they fell asleep. Sirius and Lupin kept constant tabs on their Animagus training and they repeatedly assured them that it was okay that they hadn't yielded any results yet. This was the toughest step in making the transformation and they could not offer them any other help.

Fred and George rose to the occasion and took on the task of bringing their sister up to scratch for her studies. She had missed nearly one full term of studies and needed a lot of help. Harry and Hermione gave the twins a lot of resource materials to help their sister along. In addition, Luna, Susan, and Neville showed support by taking turns tutoring the youngest Weasley after seeing how passionate her brothers were.

For the first time since he was admitted to Hogwarts, Harry returned home for the Easter holidays. All of his friends but Neville and Luna were returning to their own homes during the Easter break since they spent most of their Christmas holidays at Potter Mansion. Harry had been looking forward to the Easter holiday since Christmas. Wood was very upset that he was losing three of his team over the holidays; the final match was taking place on the first Sunday after Easter and tried his best to persuade them to stay and practice but failed. Harry was excited to spend quality time with his family and seeing Hagrid again. Hagrid was close to completing his education, had achieved top marks for N.E. for Care for Magical Creatures and was now in the midst of pursuing a mastery in the same subject. Doing well on his N.E.W.T.s opened many career paths for him, but he was adamant

about returning to Hogwarts. After all, he had called the place his home for nearly half a century. It was expected that he would complete his studies just in time for next school year.

The Grangers met Harry and Hermione at Kings Cross station and took them back to their place. They shared their relatively normal term with the Grangers as they drove back to Knightdale.

Fudge had managed to extend his term for another two years because he managed to win the favour of the public by appearing to be remorseful about his 'youthful indiscretion'. Besides, he appeared to be doing an upstanding job under the watchful eye of the Wizengamot. Harry scoffed at Fudge's escape from justice but he knew that if anyone had a right to be angry, it had to be his godfather. Sirius took the news in stride because he knew that Fudge would have to serve his sentence eventually.

Their Easter holiday was relaxing and gave them time to rest properly. Harry and Hermione spent several afternoons exploring the grounds surrounding the Potter Mansion by themselves. Since Potter Mansion was located in countryside, they had to trek through dirt roads and large forests for at least half a day before they caught sight of the nearest village. Harry and Hermione spent their mornings and evenings at the Grangers. Occasionally, Sirius and Hagrid would join them for lunch.

Harry and Hermione also spent several afternoons stocking up on potions ingredients when they noticed that the lab at the Mansion was running low. It was a good way for them to practise their skills for the upcoming O.

While the rest of their friends enjoyed the holiday with their family, Cedric really did not. Despite his mother's persuasion, she couldn't convince Amos to give him a break. Finally at the end of the holidays, he was inching towards relenting, seeing how determined his son was. However, he wanted to meet Daphne before giving his consent.

Daphne told her parents that she was dating Cedric. Her father looked grumpy at the prospect that his eldest daughter was finally

dating but accepted it because Cedric made such a good impression on him.

No one really wanted to study when they returned to school since the Final Quidditch match coming up. There was a heightened sense of excitement as the final match drew closer and closer. With all the increased tension, it was expected that brawls between the two houses would ensue. Yet none of this came to pass, partly because the Hufflepuff captain was such good friends with the Gryffindor Seeker.

The stands were filled with spectators as the day of the match arrived. Most of them either turned up in Gryffindor or Hufflepuff colours to show their support for the teams. The excitement and anticipation reached a fevered pitch as the game began.

The two teams displayed a high level of skills and teamwork. It was an intense match between the two teams and they were tied for most of the afternoon.

The golden snitch was spotted lingering near the grounds.

The two seekers pulled into an almost vertical dive as they pursue the elusive golden ball. Harry, who had an edge since he possessed a better broom, took the lead.

The golden snitch fluttered haphazardly as if knowing that it was going to be caught.

Harry threw his body forward and wrapped one of his fists around the tiny ball. Before he crashed into the ground, he pulled out of his dive, his hand in the air, and the stadium exploded. Harry soared above the crowd, with an odd ringing in his ears. A large triumph smile was plastered on his face as he held the tiny golden ball into the air.

He headed for the ground and landed. Suddenly, Wood was speeding towards him, half blinded by tears. He leapt off the broom and seized Harry around the neck as he sobbed unrestrainedly into his shoulder. Harry felt two large thumps as Fred and George came upon them then heard Angelina, Alicia, and Katie's excited voices,

“We’ve won the Cup! We’ve won the cup!” Tangled in a many-armed hug, the Gryffindor team, yelled hoarsely.

Wave upon wave of crimson supporters was pouring over the barriers and onto the pitch. Hands were raining down on their backs as they cheered enthusiastically. Harry was feeling a bit overwhelmed with all the noise and bodies pressing in on him. Then he and the rest of the team were hoisted onto the shoulders of the crowd. Thrust into the light, he saw Hermione fighting her way towards him. He wanted to reach out and kissed her senseless with all the jubilation he was feeling. She simply beamed as Harry was borne towards the stands, where Professor McGonagall stood waiting with the enormous Quidditch cup. Her eyes were wet from all her joyous sobbing - she finally witnessed Gryffindor triumph after so many years.

Professor McGonagall handed the cup to the emotional Wood as the crowd cheered on. Harry noted that the entire Hufflepuff team stood aside and clapped politely. As Wood passed Harry the Cup and he lifted it into the air, Harry swore his face would split from his wide smile.

The team’s euphoria at finally winning the Quidditch Cup lasted at least a week. The weather seemed to be celebrating along with them. But as June approached, the days become cloudless and humid, and all anyone felt like doing was strolling onto the grounds, finding some shade, and flopping down on the grass with several pints of iced pumpkin juice while perhaps even playing a casual game of Gobstones or just watching the smoothly sparkling lake.

The reality that exams were almost upon them struck the school finally and the students stayed indoors as they tried to do some last minute studying. Everyone grew tenser as each day brought them closer to their exams.

Harry and Hermione usually spent their afternoons under the beech tree near the lake, reviewing their work with their friends. Daphne took the opportunity to spend some quiet time with Cedric; they usually cuddled as they revised together. Harry had to drag Hermione for an occasional walk or a soak in the hot tub to help her unwind. She became obsessed with her upcoming exams that she had

started muttering excerpts from her textbooks under her breath. It was much tougher on them since they were taking both the third year final year exams and their O. in the same month. Their third year final year examinations started at the end of May and lasted till the sixth of June. Professor Vector informed Harry and Hermione of the dates and the regulations of their O. The exams would take place for two successive weeks and would begin two days after their third year tests were over and they would be sitting their O.W.L.s with the other fifth years.

On the sixth of June, Harry had his final third year exam. On his way to pick Hermione up from the library, he heard a harsh and loud voice behind him.

“It will happen tonight.”

Harry wheeled around. Professor Trelawney had gone rigid; her eyes were unfocused and her mouth agape.

“E-excuse me?” asked Harry.

He recognised the Professor since she had once tested him on Divination.

But Professor Trelawney didn't seem to hear him. Her eyes started to roll. Harry stood there in panic. She looked at him as though she was about to have some sort of seizure. Harry tried to remember any way he could possibly help her. Professor Trelawney spoke again, in the same harsh voice, quite unlike her own:

“The Dark Lord lies alone and friendless, abandoned by his followers. His servant has been chained these twelve years. Tonight, before midnight, the servant will break free and set out to rejoin his master. The Dark Lord will rise again with his servant's aid, greater and more terrible than ever before. Tonight... before midnight... the servant... will set out ... to rejoin... his master.”(POA)

Her head fell forward as she collapsed. Harry immediately caught her.

She suddenly held her head as she stood up.

“Are you alright?” Harry questioned with concern as he took a step back.

“I’m sorry, dear boy but thank you.” She said dreamily before heading in direction of the Astronomy tower.

They received news the next day that Peter Pettigrew had fled from Azkaban just before midnight despite an increase in security. Sirius tried to convince Amelia to send the Aurors after him but to no avail. Amelia argued that it would be akin to finding a needle in the haystack if Pettigrew remained in his Animagus form. Moreover, it was difficult to start the search because they didn’t think anyone would take him in. He betrayed the light side and it was because of his information that Tom met his downfall. Sirius relented, knowing that it was a lost cause. Knowing Pettigrew well, he agreed that Wormtail must have fled to find his master after Harry recounted what happened with Trelawney and shared his thoughts with him.

Most of their friends were free after the first week of June and spent most of their time enjoying the pleasant weather as they relaxed outside. Harry and Hermione unfortunately did not have the same luxury.

The first O.W.L., Theory of Charms was scheduled for Monday morning. Harry agreed to test Hermione after lunch on Sunday and nearly regretted at once: Hermione was very agitated and kept snatching her book from him to check that she got the answer completely right, finally hitting him on the nose with the sharp edge of the book. It caused his eye to water in pain.

“Mione, we’ve already memorised everything by heart. Please try and relax.” He protested as he rubbed his nose. He didn’t understand why she was feeling so nervous. Their Professors and their instructors had cleared them for O. and so far they’d attained ‘Outstanding’ for almost all their subjects save Divination. Hermione ignored him as she regurgitated the information from the text. Seeing the determined set of her chin, he couldn’t bear pushing the book

back to her and leaving her alone. He expelled a sigh as he continued to test her.

Harry and Hermione chose to dine in their quarters that night. It was impossible to talk to her since she had a large tome firmly placed between them as she muttered the different incantations under her breath. Harry shook his head and cleaned up after her before retreating into his study to get some of his duties done as a way to take his mind off things.

Neither of them had a proper breakfast the next morning.

Once breakfast was over, the fifth and seventh-years milled around the Entrance Hall while the other students went off to their lessons. They were called class by class to enter the Great Hall. The four large House tables had been removed and replaced instead by many tables for one, all in front of the staff-table end of the Hall where Professor McGonagall stood facing them. When they were all seated and quiet, she commenced the exam as she turned over an enormous hourglass.

Harry briefly scanned the question and discovered that he had covered all the topics tested in the examination in his revision. With a confident smile plastered on his face, he wrote furiously as his mind began to organise a suitable answers to the questions. The sounds of furiously scratching quills filled the quiet hall. When Harry finally concluded his last answer, Professor McGonagall announced that their time was up and they had to put their quills down. Harry heaved a sigh of relief as he massaged his hand. He was very satisfied with all his answers. They broke for lunch.

Harry coaxed his wife into eating a proper meal since she had already missed two meals. During lunch, she continued her usual post-exam rant. The practical portion of the Charms exam took place right after lunch. They waited in a small chamber located at the side of the hall, separated from the other fifth-years who were waiting at another larger chamber. Harry and Hermione snuggled as they waited to be called.

After a long while, Professor Flitwick entered the chamber and led them into the hall. They were the last students being tested and two ancient professors were waiting for them at the corner of the hall. They eyed them curiously since it was obvious that neither of them looked like they were fifteen.

Harry grinned when he realised that the charms he needed to do were simple. The eyes of the Professor widened in shock at the speed and the accuracy of Harry's spells. He tipped his glasses up as he watched the stunts that Harry was making his goblet do and hurriedly scribbled a letter that looked suspiciously like an 'O' before Harry left. Harry noticed that Hermione had good control over her goblet too: it seemed to do anything she wanted it to do, like an eager, faithful puppy. With large smiles plastered on their faces, they headed out of the Great Hall.

They seemed to amaze all their testing Professors with their magic skills. They were always the last ones to be tested and the Professors all looked worn out from the many hours of testing. Harry would entertain his tired examiners with an exaggerated display of magic, causing them to laugh appreciatively. It had an unfortunate side effect of causing his wife to lose some concentration. The first time he did it, she laughed out loud, but her examiner was impressed when she could still continue to cast her spell. The two weeks flew by and all their examinations were finally over.

Harry and Hermione felt as if a weight had been taken off their shoulders. They were whistling cheerfully as they headed to meet their friends after their last exam. The couple was surprised when they were told that Professor Lupin was leaving Hogwarts. Harry called Professor Lupin on his watch to find out what was going on.

He was relieved when he learnt that Lupin had resigned because Sirius had finally convinced him to come and work for him. Oswald had turned over some businesses back to Sirius and he needed the help. Lupin naturally agreed seeing how desperate his best friend was. Moreover, researching and developing new things had always been his dream. He was glad that Sirius gave him the opportunity. His friends were naturally very happy when they realised it was

something Lupin had always dreamt of doing and heartily showed their support for his decision.

The rest of the school, however, was very upset in losing such a dedicated and good teacher. McGonagall did not bother to convince him to stay when she learned of his new post, in fact, she was so happy that she cried. She remembered what Lupin wanted to do when she had discussed his career options with him many years ago. His grades certainly qualified him for the job but being a werewolf would bar him from the position he wanted. He agreed to stick it out until the end of the term.

The results came on the last day of the term. As usual, Harry and Hermione ranked at the top of their year with their astonishing results - they did well on all the subjects they took, getting all Outstandings in their third year exams. Professor Vector was surprised when she gave them their result slips. She knew that Harry and Hermione juggled between third year and fifth year curriculums. It was simply mind boggling that they would do this well.

“It’s difficult not to when Hermione keeps nagging at me to do my revision.” He admitted when Professor Vector asked how they did it in passing. There was a mischievous gleam in his eyes as he looked at his wife. Hermione resisted the urge to roll her eyes and poked him on his ribs. The young professor merely smiled.

All their friends fared very well for their exams. Daphne and Susan had the highest score in their house while Neville ranked third in the Gryffindor house. Luna was ranked first in her year.

Gryffindor once again won the House Championship for the third year running due to their amazing performance at the Quidditch Finals. The Great Hall was decorated in scarlet and gold for the end-of-year feast. Everyone was in good spirits as they chatted elatedly about their plans for the upcoming summer holiday. Most of his friends were thrilled about the upcoming Quidditch World Cup.

Cedric was planning to introduce Daphne to his parents as soon as they reached Platform nine and three quarters. The Weasley twins were excited in returning back home since their entire family would be

reunited - Bill and Charlie had returned home and Mr. Weasley was finally allowing Mrs. Weasley to return home.

The group collectively decided to spend the last week of their summer holiday at Potter Mansion if they were in the country. Harry and Hermione were sure that the Grangers were going to take them on a trip before school resumed for the fall term.

With the thought that Tom was probably steadily developing his powers, Harry and Hermione decided that they were going to stay at Number Four, Privet Drive until the end of July to ensure Harry's protection. Hermione had informed her parents of their arrangements via the watch. The Grangers offered to take them to the Dursleys since they wanted to inspect the accommodations but Harry and Hermione politely declined the offer. The Granger apparently informed Sirius because Harry received a call from him. Harry could see from the determined expression on his godfather's face that he was not going to be persuaded otherwise so Harry relented, allowing Sirius to accompany them to his relative's house.

With the final arrangements made, Harry asked Hedwig to take the letter to Vernon to inform him that he didn't need to pick him up. He told Hedwig to wait for him in his room at his relative's place. Hedwig took off, after giving him an affectionate nip on his finger. The couple snuggled contently in an armchair near the fire as they spent their last night in their quarters.

After their usual morning run, Harry and Hermione packed their things into their trunks neatly in a matter of minutes with a useful household spell they learnt from a book given to Harry for Christmas. Harry shrank Hedwig's cage and placed it into his trunk. He also shrank all their trunks into the size of matchboxes before slipping them into his pocket.

Hermione altered the length of his jeans when she realised they were too short for him.

"Are these the clothes that Mum gave you for Christmas?" She asked in amusement.

Harry shook his head. "No, I think this pair of jeans was bought last summer holidays right after our wedding." He answered. "I suppose Mum will be delighted to know that we need to go shopping again."

"I need to get some things as well. I've been tailoring all my clothes recently." She remarked as she took the carrier.

"Well, I've definitely noticed." Harry smiled as he stared at her meaningfully. Hermione ignored him but there was a smile on her face as they made their way to the entrance of the castle.

Their compartment was filled with laughter as they shared jokes and played several rounds of Exploding Snap. In the midst of the fun, Harry realised that his life had changed dramatically since he left Privet Drive in Dan's car. He had a title, a place to call his own, friends, a large caring family, freedom, and a wonderful wife. A smile appeared on his face as he counted the many blessings he received this past year. He was still smiling when the train arrived and they all stepped back through the barrier of platform nine and three-quarters and spotted his godfather.

Sirius was dressed in a finely tailored glen-check business suit that exuded power. If Harry wasn't mistaken, it was a Huntsman creation. They were costly and were custom-made to fit each customer. His face had lit up when he spotted Harry and Hermione walking towards him. Sirius drew the young couple into a brief three-way hug. A short distance away, Amelia wrapped her arms around Susan.

"Where are your trunks?" Sirius asked when he noticed the absence of trolleys. Harry was only carrying a cat carrier.

He patted his pocket. "They're in here." He smiled. Amelia walked up to them to greet them with a warm embrace as Sirius stopped to talk to Susan.

Daphne and Cedric greeted Oswald. She parked her trolley near her family before following Cedric to meet his parents. His brows had drawn into a line as he frowned in worry. Daphne assured him by

slipping her hand into his and giving him a squeeze. His answering smile was dazzling as he turned to look at her.

Mr. and Mrs. Diggory stood at the side of the station waiting for their son and his new girlfriend. Amos noted that Cedric looked very happy with her. With a smile, Cedric introduced Daphne to them. Amos was surprised that she showed no signs of jittery nerves, he was sure that she knew that he opposed their relationship. After talking with her for a while, he realised he could pick no faults with her. He grudgingly allowed them to say their good-byes in private as they retreated to put his trunk away.

Harry and Hermione said their goodbyes to all their friends before allowing Sirius lead them to the shiny black Limousine waiting outside the station. Harry arched his brows at such extravagant display of wealth.

“There’s a reason why we need to do this. Trust me.” Sirius answered with a wide smile.

The sight of a Limousine pulling up at the doorsteps of Number Four, Privet Drive caused many of the neighbours to look out of their windows and peered intently at the house. Vernon and Petunia walked out to their garden, curious about who would arrive in a Limousine. The driver leapt out from his seat and held the door. The sight of a young teenager exiting the ride confused them. He politely offered his hand to someone inside. A girl gracefully stepped out, smiling brightly at him. It was clear from the smile on her face that they were lovers.

The Dursleys couldn’t recognise the young dashing teenager at all, especially since they could only see him from the back. He was tall, lean and healthy looking. His clothes fitted him snugly and highlighted his physique. Vernon squinted his eyes to look at the young adult carefully and gaped when the boy turned around. Vernon realised it was his nephew.

His messy, short jet-black hair, lightning bolt- scar, and his round spectacles gave him away.

As his mind spun around, trying to get a grip on reality, he discovered that the teenagers did not come alone. An adult stepped out from the Limousine finally and Vernon nearly fainted at the sight of him.

“Lord Black?” He echoed.

Sirius straightened his clothes, seeing the shock on the faces of Harry’s relatives; he held back a smile and assumed an emotionless face.

“Good afternoon, Manager Dursley.” Sirius said as he looked down his nose at him.

“Welcome to my humble home, this way please.” Uncle Vernon said in a sickly polite voice as he gestured him in. Aunt Petunia immediately slipped into the kitchen to prepare beverages. Harry and Hermione exchanged glances between themselves.

Manager Dursley?

Sirius warmly guided the two teenagers into the house. Uncle Vernon shot him a look of surprise as he followed them.

Sirius absently glanced around the Dursley’s small house, leaving his godson to greet his relatives. For once they welcomed Harry, albeit a little insincerely. Sirius’s jaw tightened dangerously when he saw the cupboard under the stairs. He fought to repress his anger as he maintained an impassive face. Petunia politely offered beverages to him and the teenagers as they sat in the living room.

“I hope I’m not intruding. Harry’s my godson. I’m concerned about his welfare so I’m here to check on his accommodations. Surely, you don’t mind.” Sirius stated plainly.

“Godson? Accommodations, sir?” Vernon stammered.

Sirius looked at him plainly. “Yes, I want to ensure he’s happy here. Not that there is any reason why he wouldn’t be,” Sirius added suddenly, “I’m sure a man as successful as you in your work have the

ability to take proper care of your family. After all, we need to build strong rapport with our clients so that the company can continue to profit. To determine if you can network with people would rely solely on the type of relationship you have with your family. To illustrate, if you are to known to have abused your orphan nephew, most would find it very difficult to entrust you with more clients.”

Vernon’s face blanched as he gulped. “Yes, sir, I totally understand what you are saying. Potter’s room is currently under renovation, but I’m sure Dudley, my son, wouldn’t mind sharing his bedroom with his only cousin.” He added nervously as he wiped the sweat of his forehead.

“I don’t believe that will do. Hermione, this young lady here, has to stay with my godson at all times. She’d be very uncomfortable with such an accommodation. I’m sure you won’t mind having her stay here?” Sirius asked politely as he held his gaze.

Vernon looked like a trapped animal. “I’m sure Dudley wouldn’t mind the couch. After all, it’s just for the night.” He said anxiously.

A polite smile spread across Sirius lips. “I’m sorry for all the trouble.”

Before Vernon could say anything flattering, Sirius turned to face Harry. He had effectively dismissed his uncle. Vernon’s face had turned red from the embarrassment. The two teenagers were trying to hold back their laughter.

“I’m wanted back at office. Harry, if you need anything at all, just ring me. Do call me tomorrow and tell me if you like your new room.” He said with a knowing smile.

Harry nodded. Sirius drew the two teenagers into a hug before turning to face the Dursleys.

“I hope you will take good care of Harry and Hermione here.” Sirius said as he strode towards the door. “Have a wonderful day.” Vernon immediately ran to get the door and opened it in time for him to walk out of the house.

Harry and Hermione walked to the door and waved at Sirius as he got into the long car. Soon, the Limousine sped off.

Turning to look at his uncle, "How do you know my godfather?" Harry asked curiously.

The moustache on his uncle's face jumped irritably, a clear sign of his anger but he took a deep breath.

"He's my boss. He's recently acquired the Grunnings. I'd heard he owns a lot of businesses. How come I didn't know you had a godfather?" He demanded rudely.

Harry looked at him in surprise. Vernon hurriedly forced a smile on his face as he rephrased his words in a nicer way.

"He was away. I only learnt of him when he looked for me at school this term and he's fiercely protective of me since he felt he hasn't done his part as a godfather for the past thirteen years. Let me head up to put my things in my room before coming down to do the housework." Harry explained.

"No." He said gruffly before changing his tone. Harry could see it was causing him a lot to say it. "You don't have to do housework anymore. You and your friend are free to go out and enjoy your holidays. You're staying in Dudley's room for the night."

"Thanks, Uncle Vernon. I hope you don't mind having cat. He belongs to Hermione." Harry added as he led Hermione upstairs.

His holidays at Privet Drive had just got better.

A/N: Thank you for your reviews. Well, this is the end of the third year. I'm just tying the loose ends. Have a great week.

Chapter 23

Beta- read by frustr8dwriter

A fire had been lit in a grate that looked as if it had not been used for many years. It must have been the only source of light because it was casting long, spidery shadows upon the wall. A man's voice spoke within the room; it sounded timid and fearful.

"There's a little more in the bottle, my Lord, if you are still hungry." The voice belonged to a short balding man with greying hair, a pointed nose, and small watery eyes.

"Later," said a second voice. This belonged to a man - but it was strangely high-pitched, and cold as a sudden blast of icy wind. "Move me closer to the fire, Wormtail."

There came a chink of a bottle being put down upon some hard surface and there was dull scraping noise of a heavy chair being dragged across the floor.

"Where is Nagini?" asked the cold voice.

"I-I don't know, my Lord." replied Wormtail nervously. "She set out to explore the house, I think..."

"You will milk her before we retire, Wormtail." The other voice said. "I will need feeding in the night. The journey has tired me greatly."

"My Lord, may I ask how long we are going to stay here?"

"A week," answered the cold voice. "Or perhaps longer. This place is moderately comfortable, and we cannot proceed with the plan yet. It would be foolish to act before the Quidditch World Cup is over."

"The Quidditch World Cup, my Lord?" said Wormtail. "Forgive me, but I do not understand - why should we wait until the World Cup is over?"

There was an impatient edge to the voice that replied, "Because, fool, at this moment, wizards are pouring into the country from all over the world, and every meddler from the Ministry of Magic will be on duty, watching for signs of unusual activity, checking and double-checking identities. They'll be obsessed with security, lest the Muggles notice anything amiss. So we wait."

"Your Lordship is still determined, then?" Wormtail said quietly.

"Certainly I am determined, Wormtail." There was a note of menace in the cold voice now.

"It could be done without Harry Potter, my Lord." Wormtail said, without missing a beat, he continued. "He's so well guarded now. It is merely that if we were to use another witch or wizard- any wizard – we could be done so much more quickly! If you allowed me to leave you for a short while - you know that I can disguise myself most effectively -I could be back here in as little as two days with a suitable person..."

"I have my reasons for using the boy, as I've already explained to you, and I will use no other. I've waited for thirteen years. A few more months won't make difference. As for the protection surrounding the boy, well, I believe my plan will be effective. All that is needed is a little courage from you, Wormtail - courage you will find, unless you wish to feel the full extent of Lord Voldemort's wrath."

"My Lord, I must speak!" said Wormtail, panic in his voice now. "Throughout our journey, I have gone over the plan in my head - my Lord, Bertha Jorkins' disappearance will not go unnoticed for long, and if we proceed, if I curse..."

"If?" hissed the voice. "If? When you follow the plan, Wormtail, the Ministry need never know that anyone else has disappeared. You will do it quietly, and without a fuss. I only wish that I could do it myself, but in my present condition... come, Wormtail, one more obstacle removed and our path to Harry Potter is clear. I am not asking you to do it alone. By that time, my faithful servant will have rejoined us..."

"I am a faithful servant," interrupted Wormtail, the merest trace of sullenness in his voice.

"Wormtail, I need somebody with brains, somebody whose loyalty has never wavered and you, unfortunately, fulfil neither requirement."

"I found you," said Wormtail, there was definitely a sulky edge to his voice now. "I was the one who found you. I brought you Bertha Jorkins."

"That's true," agreed the voice, sounding amused. "A stroke of brilliance I would not have thought possible from you, Wormtail - though, if truth to be told, you were not aware how useful she would be when you caught her, were you? However, I do not deny that her information was invaluable. Without it, I could never have formed our plan, and for that you'll have your reward, Wormtail. I will allow you to perform an essential task for me, one that many of my followers would give their right hands to perform..." There was a silky edge to his mincing, cold voice.

"R-really, my Lord?" Wormtail sounded terrified again.

"Ah, you don't want me to spoil the surprise, do you? Your part will come at the very end...but I promise you - you will have the honour of being just as useful as Bertha Jorkins."

"You...you..." Wormtail's voice sounded suddenly very hoarse, as though his mouth had gone very dry. "You...are going... to kill me, too?"

"Wormtail, Wormtail," The voice placated silkily, "Why do I have to kill you? I killed Bertha because I had to. She was fit for nothing after my questioning, quite useless really. In any case, awkward questions would have been asked if she had gone back to the Ministry with the news that she had met you during her holiday. It would be an insult to her memory not to use the information I extracted from her, Wormtail."

"One more curse... my faithful servant at Hogwarts... Harry Potter is as good as mine, Wormtail. It is decided. There will be no more argument. But quiet... I think I heard Nagini..."

Lord Voldemort made strange hissing noise.

"Nagini has interesting news, Wormtail," He murmured. "She tells me that there is an old Muggle standing right outside this room, listening to every word we say. Where are your manners? Invite him in."

An elderly man using a walking stick limped into the room.

"You heard everything, Muggle?" questioned the cold voice.

"What's that you're calling me?" said the old man defiantly.

"I'm calling you a Muggle," The voice answered coolly. "It means that you're not a wizard."

"I don't know what you mean by wizard," declared the old man, "but I know I've heard enough tonight to interest the police, I have. You've committed murder and you're planning more. Who are you? Turn around and face me like a man, why don't you?"

"But I'm not a man, Muggle," replied the voice, barely audible now over the crackling of the flames." However why not? I'll face you... Wormtail, come and turn my chair around."

The servant gave a whimper before turning the chair.

The eyes of the old man widened in fear as he looked upon the thing in the chair. He was screaming so loudly that he did not hear the words the being in the chair spoke as it raised a wand. There was a flash of green light, a rushing sound, and the old man crumpled.

His eyes stared lifelessly on the ground as he collapsed.

(Abstract from GoF Chapter 1)

Two hundred miles away, a boy named Harry Potter woke up with a start. He lay flat on his back, his breathing erratic, with his hands pressed onto his face. His lightning bolt scar was burning beneath his fingers.

He felt the shifting of weight on his bed as a voice spoke, "Harry, are you alright?" The lamp on the other side of the bed was switched on suddenly. Harry expelled a sigh when he realised it was a merely a dream.

Sitting up, with one hand still on his scar, Harry fumbled around for his glasses. Hermione dutifully supplied it to him as she wrapped her arms around him. He muttered a feeble "thank you" when he took the glass of water that she had conjured as she continued with her ministrations. Harry found himself relaxing after finishing the drink. It was the combination of his wife's soothing words, her presence and the drink that helped him to calm down. He traced his stinging scar cautiously.

A brief thought crossed his mind.

"You don't reckon that he's here now, do you?" He asked as he stood up and looked out his window, as if expecting to see strangers lurking outside Number Four, Privet Drive. There was, of course, no one walking along the streets before dawn.

"No, he wouldn't dare. He's barely alive and wouldn't risk coming here for you." Hermione returned quietly.

He placed his head in his hands as he tried to recall the image of Lord Voldemort but all he could only recall was the image of the old man, lying on the dirty floor, his eyes wide open, dead.

It sent a shiver down his spine.

"The dream was so vivid and real, Mione. I dreamt of Wormtail and Lord Voldemort. They seemed to be plotting to kill me," explained Harry as he wheeled around to look at his quiet wife. An icy dread slipped into his stomach at that very thought and he turned away. A

pair of arms winded around his waist and he felt her body pressing into him.

"I didn't put up my mental shields tonight - I saw what you dreamt." She said in a low voice. Harry turned around to look at his wife, noting the haunted look on her face.

"I think it's better if you take down as much of the dream as you can remember." Hermione suggested as she steered him firmly to his new desk. He submissively sat down, summoned some parchment, and began writing. Hermione supplied the details he was lacking as he carefully wrote most of the dialogue that took place between the Master and his servant. They didn't want to omit any of the details because they felt it might be important.

Harry set his quill down as he looked through his parchment thoughtfully. The aching of his scar had subsided, allowing him to think clearly. He finally noticed that her mental shields were up. Her eyes had a distant look when he lifted his head to look at her. He lovingly tucked the stray locks falling on her face.

"What are you thinking about, honey?"

Hermione frowned slightly before turning to look at him. "I'm worried about two things primarily: first, the pain in your scar and second, your dream. We need to know if what happened in the dream is true so we need to..."

"Cross-check some of the facts with credible sources..." Harry added.

"And the easiest to check would be the existence of Bertha Jorkins - she's a witch working for the Ministry." Hermione mused with a hint of a smile.

"My scar doesn't ache anymore, so you can lower your mental defences." Harry answered with a smile. His eyes fell upon a particular statement he'd written on the parchment and his smile faded immediately. "One more curse... my faithful servant at Hogwarts... Harry Potter is as good as mine, Wormtail." His stomach

lurched, knowing that several people was going to lose their lives because of him and he felt helpless to do anything about it.

Hermione smartly rapped him on his head. "You are not to blame for any of this. Voldemort chose to do all this of his own free will." She admonished. "Moreover, I hate to admit it, but there's only so much we can do right now."

Harry gave a sheepish smile as he rubbed his head with one hand. Slipping his free arm around her waist, he directed her to their bed. "It's late; we should try to get back to sleep. We have a long day tomorrow." Harry reminded. Hermione placed the parchment neatly away before allowing Harry to guide her back to the relatively new bed.

As promised, the room they were staying in was given a new make-over the day after they arrived. Uncle Vernon had even bought new furniture to replace the old and battered ones in Harry's small room. The room was also given a fresh new coat of paint. Uncle Vernon wisely removed all traces of his maltreatment of Harry from the room: gone were the three locks and the cat-flap. Aside from all that, Hermione also added more improvements to the room. She magically expanded it, adding a personal bathroom, sitting room, and a study room. However, it was still smaller than the space they were accustomed to, but they were happy since it met all their needs. Harry added the finishing touches by sticking a large communication mirror in one of the empty walls. Naturally, they placed an anti-Muggle ward around their room for fear of that Dursleys would find out.

Despite being rudely awakened in the middle of the night, Harry and Hermione woke up early for a jog around the small and quiet neighbourhood. When they had completed their run, most of the neighbours had started on their morning routines.

"Good morning." One of the neighbours greeted warmly as he checked his mail. Harry and Hermione waved cheerily at him as they made their way back. Their change of attitude was a result of Harry losing the scruffy look that the neighbours associated with 'bad apples', the way he arrived in a Limo, and his polite demeanour.

The house was still quiet when Harry and Hermione returned and they headed upstairs for a shower. As usual, Harry couldn't help but smile in amusement at the sight of his closet filled with new clothes. Jean Granger had taken them shopping after spending their first night in the Dursleys. She'd guessed that Hermione would need a desperate update of her wardrobe. Of course, she decided to help Harry to shop for new clothes, as well. This, Hermione reminded Harry during their shopping expenditure, was one of the perks that came along with being a part of her family. Not that he really minded, Harry thought with a smile, Dan and Jean were like the parents he never had.

Harry scribbled a note of appreciation for Hermione's actions the previous night and slipped it into the special jar filled with short messages from him. The couple had started the practice so that they would always remember not to take things for granted.

The Dursley household was finally awake when Harry and Hermione entered the kitchen. Aunt Petunia, wearing a floral apron, was cutting some grapefruit into quarters. His uncle's face was hidden behind the newspaper. The adults briefly looked up when Harry and Hermione greeted them amicably and noted that they were in new outfits. The sound of the rustling of newspaper could be heard as Uncle Vernon adjusted his position uncomfortably. Clearing his voice, Uncle Vernon greeted them politely in return.

Ever since the Dursleys found out that Harry's godfather was a rich businessman who owned the company that employed Vernon, they had been trying their best to get into his good graces. This meant that they made a great effort to refrain from showing that they loathed Harry and tried to treat him nicely. Harry found it amusing to watch the number of times Vernon's moustache bristled petulantly whenever he tried to be courteous to him and Hermione during breakfast and dinner - the only times in the day they would see each other.

Vernon's small piggy eyes followed the actions of his nephew carefully. His eyes widened upon Harry's impeccable manners - he helped to seat the girl before taking a seat himself. His moustache

bristled again with irritation - he felt it was improper for teenagers of opposite genders to stay in the same room. Besides, the fact he had to accept another 'freak' into his house was reason enough to make his blood simmer in anger. Harry suspected that Hermione's insistence in joining them for morning and evening meals had something to do with antagonising his relatives with their presence and he secretly enjoyed every moment of it. The occupants in the kitchen settled into a comfortable silence as the young couple prepared their own breakfast cereal.

As they began to eat, they heard the familiar thundering footsteps that announced Dudley's arrival. He had finally achieved growing wider than he was tall which meant that he was taking up more space at the table whenever he sat. His piggy eyes darted to the two large bowls of cereal sitting across the table longingly.

Dudley glared at his mother when she set a quarter of unsweetened grapefruit onto his plate. Ever since Dudley came back with his end of year report, his life at home had turned into a living hell. The Smeltings school nurse had insisted that he be put on a strict diet of fruits and vegetables to make him lose weight. After many rounds of argument, the refrigerator was finally emptied of most of the food that were not on the list given to them by the nurse. To make Dudley feel better, Aunt Petunia decided that the entire family should follow the diet.

Harry and Hermione pointed out that they needed not follow Dudley's diet. They didn't need to lose weight, and with their exercise regimen, it was important that they take in different type of food for nutrition and energy. For fear of his boss discovering that he had mistreated his nephew, he grudgingly gave them the permission not to follow the diet. This became the reason for Dudley's discontent.

Dudley was too used to being given privileges so the idea that Harry was being given more leeway did not sit well with him.

"Why can't I eat that?" Dudley questioned sulkily as he pointed to the bowls of cereal Harry and Hermione were having.

The identical expressions on their faces were the epitome of innocence.

"Because your nurse insists that you follow this diet," Uncle Vernon explained crabily as he set his paper down on the table.

Dudley didn't seem to be too happy with his answer. "Do you even call this food?" He grumbled as he was about to toss his grapefruit away. He changed his mind when he realised that it was all he was having for breakfast.

He made a face when he glanced down at the small portion of grapefruit on his plate. "That's all I get?" He demanded. Aunt Petunia nodded as she looked at Dudley meaningfully. He had finished all of his grapefruit and was eying the food on the table intently. Aunt Petunia decided to give him another quarter, seeing the ravenous look on his face. Uncle Vernon gave a resigned sigh as he picked up his spoon.

The ginger-coloured cat prowled into the kitchen and weaved between his owners' legs, rubbing his large body affectionately along their legs. Harry noticed that his aunt had halted her task and was watching the cat with obvious disdain.

Crookshanks had been meting out punishment in his own way - he would dirty his paws with soil and mark the clean and shiny floors with his paw prints as often as he could. Aunt Petunia grudgingly cleaned after him every single time. Harry, with amusement written all over his face, picked Crookshanks up and admonished him when he realised that his Aunt was nearing her breaking point. Crookshanks unwillingly relented and reduced the number of times he dirtied the house in a day.

"Good morning, Crookshanks." Hermione cooed as she picked him up. "Let's get you some breakfast." Harry offered to clean up while she took Crookshanks upstairs and he received a peck on his cheek in approval.

His uncle frowned at the display of affections but held his tongue. Harry couldn't help grinning from ear to ear as he did the dishes.

"Well, I had a wonderful breakfast, thank you. I'll see you this evening." Harry said with a grin as he sprinted upstairs to his room. He cast the usual spells when he walked in.

Hermione curled in the large comfortable armchair, reading the small note Harry had written. There was a wide contented smile on her face.

Harry topped off the water and the food at Hedwig's perch. He had tasked his familiar to bring the letters to Potter Mansion where the house elves would dispatch them accordingly. Harry smiled as he tenderly kissed Hermione's forehead. "So what are we going to do now?"

Hermione smiled as she placed the note back into the jar. "I was thinking of we could complete our holiday assignments today. Even though we've finished our O., we still have some work to do."

"Yes, dear." Harry answered dutifully as he walked to his desk.

After an hour of furious scribbling, Harry gleefully set his eagle quill down as he shouted "Done!" Harry stood up and stretched a little before turning to look at his wife. Her body was still bent over her assignment as she wrote fervently.

"Mione, we only need to write twelve inches for this essay." He reminded as he rolled up his essay, satisfied that he had covered every point adequately and placed his homework aside. It was such a warm afternoon and Harry didn't felt like starting on his next assignment. He took the pile of letters in his tray and checked through them absently as he walked across the room to sit in the large and comfortable armchair. After he read his mail, Harry took out those that needed a response from him and walked back to his desk to compose the appropriate replies. Hedwig had finally returned from her trip and was napping on her perch. The frantic scratching of her quill stopped as Hermione examined her assignment critically. Finally, she rolled up her parchment - it was easily twice the length of his.

"I think I had enough of homework for today." Harry remarked as he walked over and wrapped his arms around her shoulders lovingly.

"How about spending some time outside? The weather's wonderful today."

"But we've only just begun." Hermione pointed out. "We still have History of Magic and we've been spending a lot of time outdoors lately."

"It is the holidays, honey. Let's go out and have some fun." Harry pleaded, giving her a puppy-dog look.

It was a mistake for her to turn around to look at him.

The corner of her lips quirked against her own will as she relented. Harry gave a cheer of joy as he grabbed Hermione by her hand and dragged her down the stairs with Crookshanks at their heels.

The cat was being unusually happy - purring contently as he followed them and they soon discovered the reason moments later. A worn-out Aunt Petunia stepped out of the kitchen with a mop in her hands.

"See you later, Aunt Petunia." Harry bade, seeing the blank look on her face, he added, "I'm taking Crookshanks with me."

There was a look of relief on her face. "Please take your time and enjoy yourselves." She added before exiting the living room.

Harry repressed a smile as he turned around and picked Crookshanks up. "Now, what did I say about tiring out Aunt Petunia? If you really get on her nerves, you might need to spend two weeks in the room." Harry answered as he scratched behind Crookshanks' ears.

I did take your advice. I've limited the damage to the kitchen. Crookshanks answered. There's just nothing exciting to do here. No gnomes to chase, just stupid spiders. He grumbled as his owners laughed at the sullen tone of his voice.

Dudley furiously kicked the side of the slide to vent his pent up frustrations. His friends stood a safe distance away from him, idly chatting. The playground was unusually empty for a nice summer day.

The ominous presence of Dudley and his gang naturally chased the children away.

"Take it easy, Dud. If you want, we can go grab something." Piers suggested.

"Dad's not giving me pocket money right now so I'll have to head back home for lunch." He grumbled, giving the slide another good kick.

"It's damn boring just hanging around here doing nothing, Dud." Gordon grumbled loudly.

"Isn't that Harry?" Malcolm said as he pointed to two figures walking towards them with their hands linked and they appeared to be laughing. Piers squinted his eyes and after seeing lightning bolt scar on his forehead, he remarked, "Yeah, that's Harry and I think he got himself a girl."

Dudley's piggy eyes narrowed. "Yes, he did. I don't understand why Dad would allow his girl to live with him. What's worse, we aren't even allowed to touch him because he's got himself a rich godfather." He growled and kicked the slide hard. Suddenly an idea crossed his mind. "If he's got himself a rich godfather, then he must have a lot of money." He smirked as he rubbed his hands meaningfully. The gang caught his meaning fast. With smirks plastered on their faces, they approached the couple.

Harry was having fun teasing his wife when they sensed that they were not alone. From a distance, he saw four boys approaching them.

Not again.

The boys soon encircled Harry and Hermione with ominous smiles on their lips as they stared at them.

Harry was looking unusually bored as if he'd expected such a confrontation.

"Well, well, what do we have here? Why, it's Potter and with a girl no less." Gordon questioned as he checked her out. Harry instinctively stepped between him and his wife, blocking her from view. Crookshanks arched his back as he hissed threateningly.

"Crookshanks, back down." Harry advised calmly. Crookshanks gave him a dirty look, but nevertheless, heeded his words and stood by Hermione. She picked him up and lovingly stroked him.

Don't get into a fight, she cautioned. It'll be sticky business. I'm sure you remember what happened the last time you defended us against Warren and his gang.

Yes, honey. He replied complacently as he expelled a breath.

There was just a disconcerting aura around Harry when he spoke coolly to them. "If I were you, Gordon, I'd pay attention to where I'm looking." He warned. The feral glint in his eyes made Gordon take a step back.

"Empty your pockets and we'll leave the both of you alone." Pier spat bravely as he tried to terrify Harry. Instead of seeing fear, there was a look of interest as he turned to face his cousin.

"Extorting money now, Dudley? I find it strange; doesn't Uncle Vernon give you plenty of pocket money?" Harry asked as he stuffed his hand into his pocket. "Never mind, if you want it, then come and take it from me." Harry challenged as he took a step closer to them.

The four boys exchanged looks of surprise among themselves, unsure of what to do. They didn't understand why they felt so subdued by him.

Harry smiled. He remembered all the times they used him as a punching bag - it was satisfying to see them afraid for a change.

"Well, if you've changed your mind, then you'd better turn around and walk away. I'll forget this ever happened." advised Harry with a friendly smile plastered on his face.

"What are you going to do if we don't? Run to your rich and powerful godfather?" Dudley demanded loudly as he squared his shoulders.

Harry laughed a mirthless laugh which unnerved them. "No, I won't even need to resort to that." He answered confidently as he took another step closer to them. It was the predatory gleam in his eyes that made his mouth run dry. It was as if they reversed their roles and Dudley and his gang had become his prey. The gang, acting on instinct, backed down.

"It seems as if you've made up your mind. Have a good day." Harry answered as he held his wife's hand and continued his way to the nearby shopping centre, whistling a happy tune.

"I'm glad that went quite well," Hermione commented when they were well out of ear-shot.

"So do I," Harry answered. "So where do you want to go?"

"How about catching a movie and maybe having lunch at a café?" Hermione suggested.

"I don't think we can do either activity with Crookshanks around." Harry pointed out.

Go on and have a good time. I can handle myself. Crookshanks added.

The couple exchanged looks.

"Stay away from Dudley and his gang. He might pick on you instead." Harry cautioned as he looked at Hermione's familiar.

There was an edge of annoyance in his tone. Stop nagging as if you're an old man and go. I'll be back before dinner. I'm heading over to Mrs. Figg's to talk to Mr. Tibbles. Crookshanks answered as he trotted towards the park.

"Mrs. Figg? Who is Mr. Tibbles?" Hermione echoed.

"Mrs. Figg is a neighbour. She's obsessed with cats. Well, occasionally, the Dursleys would leave me at her place so that they could go out. It was utterly boring, staying with her and listening to her drone about her cats. Mr. Tibbles is one of her cats." Harry explained with a smile as they linked hands. "So let's get on with our date, shall we?"

Harry and Hermione caught a comedy, *The Mask*, after a quick lunch. Milo reminded Harry of a Crup, a magical creature he'd seen in books, save the forked tail. They cuddled close as they watched the movie, munching on popcorn. Harry was delighted with the cool moves *The Mask* pulled on the dance floor. "Maybe we should try the American Swing the next time." Harry remarked into her ear as they watch *The Mask* dancing with the character, Tina.

Hermione's eyes widened at the way *The Mask* effortlessly swinging the girl around to the tune *Hey, Pachuco!*

"I think I'll pass. I'd rather stick with the fox trot." Hermione answered. Harry chuckled warmly in response as they snuggled closer.

The movie soon ended and Hermione was tickled by the way Harry was mimicking *The Mask* way of walking. Harry even imitated the actions and the expression that accompanied *The Mask's* iconic words, "I'm smoking," causing Hermione to crack up.

Harry's eyes brightened up when they walked past a large indoor ice skating rink where many families and couples seemed to be having a lot of fun.

"That looks pretty exciting." Harry said elatedly as he pulled his wife to look at the scene. Seeing the skaters speeding across the rink made him grin. Hermione cast a look at the rink, before turning away and trying to walk off.

"Mione," Harry called out as he grabbed her hand. "It looks fun and I've never tried it before. Please?" He implored as he gave her an adorable pleading look.

"Alright, alright. I must warn you that I'm not really good at it and it may take a while for you to learn how to skate with any sort of speed." Hermione relented, unable to resist him.

"It's okay, we can learn together." Harry answered happily. A grin large enough to split his face into two appeared on his face, making her laugh as he pulled her towards the rink.

Harry and Hermione, after donning the skates, slowly trudged into the rink step by step. Hermione underrated her own abilities because she was quite proficient at it. "I took lessons when I was younger." Hermione explained when she felt his curiosity at her ability. Harry stood aside, with his head cocked, as he observed the way she skated. After watching for a while, he tried to imitate her actions as he struggled to keep his balance. Joy seemed to bubble in her, causing her to laugh easily as she watched Harry learning.

There were naturally several comical occasions when he lost his balance.

Her face was red with merriment when she watched Harry waving his arms frantically, in his desperate attempts to keep steady before she finally held on to him. The scene reminded her of a particular scene from the cartoon Tom and Jerry. While Tom was chasing after Jerry, the water froze suddenly. As he started to fall, he tried to steady himself on the ice by waving his arms frantically. Harry laughed along with her, seeing the joy on her face before playfully poking her on her ribs. Hermione skated skilfully away from harm, leaving Harry at the side as he pouted adorably.

"Try to catch me, sweetheart." Hermione teased, standing a safe distance from him.

Harry eyed the distance that lay between them. "You just wait until I get a hang of this." Harry returned in faux-irritation, evoking pearls of laughter from his wife.

Harry was nothing but determined to learn and to her surprise, he seemed to be getting and better at it. She skated protectively around

him, advising him when she spotted him making mistakes, and occasionally lending a hand.

The dogged look on his face as he tried to skate on ice made her smile sweetly. His eyes twinkled with pure elation from the speed he was gliding down the length of the rink.

As he approached the end of the rink, a thought suddenly crossed his mind, "Hermione? How do you stop?"

Before she could respond, Harry slammed into the side of the rink with a loud crashing sound. He was thrown a small distance back and he tethered unsteadily as he tried to balance himself. For several moments, he looked like a penguin in cartoon, dancing clumsily on ice.

Hermione threw her head back and laughed heartily at the sight. Harry finally stabilised after a while. Drawing his hand through his hair sheepishly, he skated to her side. Scanning the rink, he realised that she was not the only person who found him amusing.

Hermione calmed down after a while. "How I love you, Harry." She admitted with a smile and pecked him on the lips.

"Well, let me show you how to stop." Hermione began as she started to speed, slow down before pulling the skates so that it was perpendicular to the direction she was going and she skidded to a standstill.

"Think you can manage it?" Hermione questioned with a smile.

His brows were drawn into a line. "I think I'll stick with crashing onto walls if I want to glide that fast." He answered after thinking about it for a while. The corners of her lips quirked in amusement and she insisted that Harry at least try. Harry had more sense to start out slow until he was confident that he would stop properly.

Harry and Hermione skated around the rink with their hands interlinked in a comfortable pace. Harry attempted to extract his

revenge but Hermione was too quick for him. Harry end up chasing after Hermione.

"Oh stop it, Harry." Hermione laughed as she deftly skated around the approaching skater.

"I did promise that I would get you when I finally got a hang of it." Harry answered as he grinned mischievously as he gave her a chase.

Hermione did all she could to persuade him not to chase her but Harry doggedly followed. After a while, when they felt too cold and tired, they made their way to the side of the rink for some respite.

With arms slipped around each other's waist, they leisurely skated to the side.

"You really did a good job," Hermione complimented. "I didn't believe you could keep up that long."

"Thank you, milady. I had an excellent teacher." Harry answered. "Though, I think she thought too highly of me, she believed I could miraculously learn to stop by myself." He answered as he wiggled his brows.

"It's not my fault. I didn't think you would try dashing. I had a lesson plan. I wanted you to get used to gliding before I moved on." Hermione answered and he chuckled good-naturally. Hermione removed her skates as she sat at the bench.

Harry set off to join the long queue and pick up drinks, leaving Hermione to watch the skaters on the rink. Hermione was surprised when a tall, lean boy with wavy brown hair sat next to her. The good looking guy had a friendly smile on his face. "Hermione! I didn't think I'd ever see you again." He greeted as he flashed a disarming smile.

One of her eyebrows was raised in shock as she looked at him closely. "Do I know you?" She questioned cautiously.

He gave a nervous laugh as he rubbed the back of his neck. However, the twinkling in his starling blue eyes did not fade away. "Well, it has

been a long time since we've seen each other." He extended his hand, "I'm Ray Vaughan."

Hermione eyed him closely, and after a while, the image of a similar looking boy, a much younger one flashed in her head. She covered her mouth in surprise as her eyes lit up immediately. "Gosh, I didn't think I'd ever run into you since you moved." Hermione answered excitedly.

The grin on his face widened when he knew she finally recognised him. Ray was three years older than her and used to be one of her neighbours when she was young. They used to play together all the time.

Ray chuckled gently. "How are you? I'd been by the old neighbourhood a few times but had no luck catching you at home. You're attending a private boarding school now, right? How is it?" He asked curiously.

"Yes, I am. It's great. I'm great too." Hermione answered with a friendly smile.

"Did you do something to your teeth?" She questioned as she looked at him intently. "There's something different about your smile."

His eyes widened exaggeratedly as he humorously covered his mouth with both his hands. "I'm caught by the dentist's daughter." He teased playfully. "Yes, I wore braces to correct the bite." He turned contemplative, "Must be achieving top grades in your school huh?"

Her cheeks turned red as she rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Well, yes." As much as she loved schooling, there wasn't anything she could really share with her childhood friend without breaking the secrecy laws of the Wizarding world. Her brows drew into a frown as she recollected how easy it was for them to speak- they used to be able to share about everything together in the past. However, she found herself watching her words carefully even while talking about something as common as school.

He raised an eyebrow in surprise at her reserve.

"Well, how are you?" Hermione questioned with a slightly forced smile.

"I'm doing pretty well. I'm not the first in my year but I'm somewhere there." He grinned widely. "I'm now playing lead guitar for a band."

"Wow, that's great. I remember that's something you have always dreamt of. Congratulations." She added with some genuine excitement.

Ray grinned as he rubbed his neck. "I can't believe you still remember."

"It's all you dreamt of when you were young," answered Hermione.

"Well, that's true. Did you come alone?" Ray asked curiously as he looked around.

"No, I came with my boyfriend. He's buying drinks as we speak." Hermione answered with a smile, cringing inwardly at the lie.

"Wow. You actually have a boyfriend?" Ray remarked. "How long have you been dating?"

We dated for a day before we found ourselves married.

"We've been together since last summer," Hermione answered, satisfied that it was the truth.

Harry finally came back with drinks. The smile on his face was replaced with a look of surprise when he saw a guy sitting next to her. He seemed to be listening attentively to her as she chatted with him animatedly. Harry noticed that she was radiating joy as she spoke to him and he frowned slightly.

Hermione turned to look at him, as if she had sensed his presence and noticed the rigid way he was standing as he looked at her friend. The smile on Hermione's face widened as she stood up to stand by her side. Harry relaxed a little at the sight of her approaching him.

Her fingers curled around his arm affectionately as she introduced Harry. "This is Harry Potter. Harry, this is my first friend, Ray Vaughan."

A smile appeared on his face as he looked at Hermione-he was happy to know that Hermione actually had a friend. Hermione flashed an affectionate smile as she slipped her arm around his waist and took one of the cups.

The couple did not notice the way Ray smiled as he looked at them.

"It's good to meet you," Harry said.

"It's good to meet you too. She was just telling me about you and I have never seen Hermione being so passionate about anything but books." Ray teased and he held his hands up in the posture of surrender when Hermione glared at him. "You did the neighbours a good deed by teaching Warren and his gang a good lesson," Ray commented with a smile. "Hermione told me all about it. It's wonderful that she has someone to stick up for her not that she needs one anyway-"

Harry's eyes were dancing in amusement as he looked at her.

"-After all she could scare them away by throwing her thick books at them..."

Her eyes narrowed. "You prat!"

However, her attentions turned to the person who was holding her- Harry couldn't repress his laughter and she hit him instead.

"It's really funny, Mione. I really can't help laughing." Harry defended himself as he tried desperately to stop laughing.

"Mione?" Ray echoed as he looked at his friend. "Wow, so it's alright to call you now? How about Herm? "

"That's Hermione for you, Ray," added Hermione.

Ray chuckled gaily. He saw his friends beckon him to join them. "Well, you two have fun. I've got to go. Hermione, maybe we can get together soon and catch up? I can invite both of you to the gig that my band's playing pretty soon." Ray asked hopefully.

"Sure," she answered. He set off to borrow a pen from the counter, leaving the couple alone.

Harry looked at her enquiringly.

"It feels different, Harry. We used to be neighbours until I was eight, then his family moved away and we lost contact. It used to be easy talking to him. There was just so much I can't talk to him because of our laws." Hermione explained.

"You regret?" Harry asked thoughtfully.

"I don't, Harry. I'm happy with you. I just realise I no longer have a place in this world." Hermione replied.

Ray soon returned with a pen and they exchanged numbers.

"I never needed your number before, since I was living so close to you. All I needed to do was to shout from my room. You can expect a call from me." He spoke. Turning to Harry, he added sombrely, "Take good care of Hermione."

Harry nodded. "I will." If he had read Ray well, it was clear that he still had feelings for his wife. Ray smiled after clapping him on the back.

Ray left after bidding them good-bye.

"You wouldn't mind, would you? I really want to watch his performance." Hermione asked as she stowed the piece of paper in her pocket.

Harry smiled as he rubbed the wedding ring he placed on her left hand with his thumb. "Not at all."

Her answering smile was dazzlingly as she laid her head on his shoulder.

"What did you and Ray used to like to do together?" He asked inquired and she began sharing a few stories from her past.

Ray and Hermione shared a love for books and when they were very young they would act out some of the stories together. She told Harry that once she remarked to Ray that it was unjust that the princesses in the story didn't seem to be able to defend themselves and needed constant saving from knights. She and Ray decided to change the story slightly, so that the princess and the knight ended up working together, overcoming many obstacles as a team. Harry repressed the smile that threatened to split his face as she was sharing this story with him. It was just like his wife to feel that way, but he didn't think she would've been that much of a feminist when she was still so young.

Hermione also told him the countless summer days, when they were a little older, that they sat on the grass while Ray would practise on his acoustic guitar and sing.

Harry and Hermione went to a nice restaurant for dinner before heading home.

There were smiles on their faces as they walked along the road towards Number four, Privet Drive. The couple was very happy with their date.

When they entered the house, they noticed that something was off.

For once, everyone was at the living room. The television was switched off, making the house eerily silent. Harry and Hermione wore puzzled expressions on their face as they entered the house and greeted them.

"So, you're finally back." Uncle Vernon pronounced firmly as he glared at them. Harry glanced at the smirk on Dudley's face and expelled a sigh.

"Is something wrong, Uncle Vernon?"

"Wrong?" He echoed as his face turned purple with rage. "I house you and feed you yet you steal money from us so that you can go out and have a good time." Vernon bellowed; his face was turning purple with rage.

Harry's eyes narrowed into a frown. "Are you accusing me of being a thief?" He questioned softly.

"If your godfather wasn't my boss, I would've called the police. You stole a few hundred pounds from the safe!" He shouted.

Harry held Hermione back.

"No, I didn't." Harry answered confidently, meeting his glare.

His moustache twitched irritably. "Don't you deny it, boy. Dudley said he saw you." Vernon spat. He took a deep breath, "I'd be willing to let you off, on your godfather's account, provided that you give us twice the amount you've taken from us."

"Then you'll get nothing at all because two times zero is still zero." Harry hissed.

"Why you brat!" Uncle Vernon lunged forward, trying to grab Harry by the neck but Harry side-stepped him easily. Uncle Vernon crashed onto the wall behind Harry.

"Vernon!" Aunt Petunia screamed shrilly.

Hermione immediately walked to the phone and began dialling for the local police.

"No!" shouted Dudley as he tried to snatch the phone out of her hands.

Harry immediately leapt into the defence of Hermione, grabbed one of his flailing arms, twisted his arm into a lock and shoved him hard

onto the ground. Dudley squealed loudly as he struggled against the hold to no avail.

"Diddy darling!" Aunt Petunia screamed shrilly as she searched around the living room for something to hit Harry with. Her eyes fell on a large paper weight sitting on the coffee table. Aunt Petunia grabbed the large ornament on the coffee table and charged at Harry with the thing held high.

"Harry!" Hermione screamed in panic. There was a fluttering of wings as Hedwig swooped and grabbed the heavy ornament from her hands with her talons. She hooted angrily as she placed the ornament into Hermione's hand. Aunt Petunia was shocked and stared into her empty hands blankly.

"You insane woman!" Hermione screamed as she whipped out her wand and pointed at Harry's aunt. She immediately froze on the spot, her pupils contracting at the sight of the wand.

The house immediately became deathly silent as all eyes fixed upon them. Nostrils flaring, Hermione's breath was quick and shallow as she held the wand.

"You'll get into trouble if you use magic, girl." Vernon began as he held up his arms and tried to approach Hermione.

Crookshanks appeared, hissing furiously as he circled Uncle Vernon.

"No, we won't." Hermione answered with a grim smile. "Harry and I are cleared to do magic away from school. I'm sure you're familiar with what happens when an underage wizard uses magic outside school?" Hermione questioned as she tossed the ornament aside and used a "Reducto" spell to blast it into pieces.

The Dursleys backed away from her as a disconcerting quiet fell between them.

"Do you see any owls?" Hermione demanded crossly. "Now, let's get back to the issue on hand, shall we? Isn't it clear enough that Harry can't be the thief?" Hermione questioned as she glared at Vernon.

"Dudley just tried to stop me from calling the police because he was afraid of being arrested."

"You're lying. He wanted to stop you because he didn't want to see Harry arrested." Vernon blurted. He immediately took a step back when he saw that Crookshanks was ready to pounce.

"Why I'm sure Harry isn't afraid of being arrested for something he hasn't done. We can settle the whole issue by getting the police involved. Besides, according to the laws, everyone is innocent until proven guilty. If evidence is found, then the guilty party shall be punished and thrown in jail. The food in the jail is so disgusting that most would choose to starve themselves to death." She answered as she stared at Dudley.

Dudley paled even more.

Seeing no flaw in logic, Vernon agreed and picked up the phone.

"No, Dad, don't call them. Harry didn't take it. I did." Dudley finally admitted.

A hush fell over the room.

"What?" Uncle Vernon said, unable to believe his ears.

"What are you talking about, Diddy darling?" Aunt Petunia questioned as she placed her arms around him.

"I took the money in the safe." He admitted as he stared at his father. Uncle Vernon turned to look at Hermione and Harry. For once, he was speechless.

"Well?" Harry questioned. "I believed you tried to accuse me of stealing and attempted to knock the stuffing out of me." Harry answered as he tapped his feet impatiently on the ground.

His face turned into an ugly shade of plum as he stared at his nephew. The colour began to fade from his face, leaving purple blotches on his face.

"I'm sorry." He said contritely. "Would you please not tell your godfather?"

"Are you kidding?" Harry demanded loudly. "Your son attempted to extort money from me in the afternoon. He stole from you and blamed me for taking the money. You believed him and attempted to knock me and Hermione out despite my protest that it wasn't me. You think an apology is sufficient?"

"You shouldn't expect more than that, freak!" Dudley shouted.

"Quiet, Dudley. What do you want me to do?" Uncle Vernon questioned in a somewhat calm tone.

The incident made Harry realised that he was still under their thumb if he chose to live with them. They were not inclined to change if they remained in their stronghold.

A smirk appeared on his face. "I just had an idea. It's something all three of you have to do. Pack up; everyone must be ready to leave by the end of the hour. We're going for a holiday." Harry answered.

The Dursleys stared at him as if he had gone mad.

There was a hint of smile on Hermione's face when she hurried upstairs to pack up.

"I'll be there with you in a minute." Harry told Hermione.

"I don't really need your help to pack. I'll just use the household charms we've learnt." Hermione answered.

The Dursleys grudging listened as they dragged themselves upstairs to get their things.

"Sirius, there's been a change of plans." Harry said when he contacted Sirius. "I'm heading home with the Dursleys."

Hedwig, return to Potter Mansion. I'll see you in a little while.

And let your insane relatives lay a hand on you? Hedwig demanded. They are barking mad.

I'll be fine. Hermione's here. I think my relatives are afraid of her. Harry answered with a smile.

Harry headed upstairs and shrank their two trunks and put them in his pocket while Hermione carried Crookshanks in her arms. The half-kneazle was eying the Dursleys warily as if anticipating that they would try to attack his owners. The Dursleys had packed three bags of clothes and were waiting for them quietly at the living room. From the grumpy expression on Dudley's face, he did not seem convinced to come along. Per Harry's instructions that they would be gone for awhile, they shut off all gas and water supplies. After ensuring that the place was locked up, Harry summoned Charles, Gareth, and Dobby. Aunt Petunia screamed at the sight of the three miniature creatures with large heads and small bodies.

Charles stiffened immediately and cast a dirty look at her, silencing her at once.

"Good evening, my Lord and Lady." The three house elves greeted with a bow.

"It's great to see you again. These are my relatives." Harry said as he gestured to the Dursleys. "They'll be living with us for a little while."

Charles turned livid at the sight of them but nodded.

"Well, Charles could take us back. Dobby and Gareth, could you see to their travel arrangements?" Hermione asked diplomatically.

"How're we going to travel?" Vernon demanded they he felt Dobby holding him. "Don't touch me, thing!"

Charles narrowed his eyes into slits as he glared at him. "We're house elves, Muggle."

Harry and Hermione exchanged looks. "We're going to be apparated. They will need to hold on to you. You might leave parts of your body behind if you distract Dobby or Gareth. By the way, house elves have their own brand of magic. You don't want to cross them." Harry warned.

Vernon flinched at the thought of these creatures possessing magic. "Why can't we use some normal method?" Vernon lamented.

"This is a normal method for Wizards." Harry snapped. "Dobby and Gareth, bring them to the foyer." There was no protest when they apparated to Potter Mansion.

Two rows of house elves lined on two sides bowed and greeted their master and mistress warmly. Harry and Hermione greeted each one of them warmly. Aunt Petunia nearly fainted from the sight of so many house elves while Vernon was gaping at the splendour of the large house.

Amelia and Sirius, dressed in their usual robes, engulfed the two teenagers with a tight embraces upon their arrival. Sirius frowned when he saw the adult Dursleys trying to estimate the prices of the decorations in the foyer.

"They are priceless." Sirius snapped as he glared at Petunia and Vernon.

"Y-You've got a nice place, Lord Black." He stammered as he stared at the clothes he was wearing.

"I'm a wizard and this is what wizards wear. By the way, this house isn't mine." He said softly as he pointed to the crest hung prominently.

"The Noble and Most Ancient House of Potter" Vernon read. His eyes widened. "It belongs to the br-Harry?"

An impish grin appeared on Sirius' face. "Oh yes. He comes from a prestigious line of rich and powerful Lords - He's not a product of a wastrel."

The truths made his world spin and Vernon was reduced to a blubbering idiot.

While they were still gawking at the foyer in awe, Harry was giving instructions to Charles as to what to do with his relatives.

"My Lord, I don't think it's prudent to have them in the prestigious Mansion of the Potters. They broke all family ties between your parents and themselves when your parents were married." Charles began.

"Well, I need them to be here. Anyway, I think it'll good for them to experience the magical world first hand. You'll be placed in charge of their arrangements. If you must put them to work to see how magic works in a house, do it." Harry said.

Charles gave an impish grin before bowing.

Dudley and Vernon were staring fearfully at the portrait waving his sword furiously at him. Their eyes widened when they realised that all the portraits could move and they didn't seem to be so welcoming.

"Welcome to the Magical world." Harry grinned warmly as he gestured around. "This is my family home, Potter Mansion."

"We're in the Magical world? " Vernon stammered in trepidation.

"You must've guessed from the outfits most of them are wearing." Harry answered innocently. "Anyway, you'll be staying in here for the rest of July. I must warn you that it'll take at least half a day of walking along dirt roads before you see another house. So trying to leave will be futile. Charles will be in-charge of taking care of you." Harry said. "Did I miss anything?" He turned to Hermione.

"There are magical and non-magical creatures in the forest. Don't wander there." Hermione added.

"H-How about getting to work?" Vernon questioned in surprise.

"I believe Sirius has just approved your leave of absence." Harry grinned as he looked at Sirius. Sirius nodded with a smile.

"Just relax and do try to enjoy your stay here." Harry added. "Well, I 'm tired. We'll see you in the morning."

A/N: Thanks for taking the time to review and reading.

Chapter 24

Beta-read by frustr8dwriter

A large grin graced Harry's features when he realised that he was in his own massive and comfortable bed at the Potter Mansion. He could hear Hermione starting her usual morning routine and decided to get up. A moving photograph of Hermione and himself donned in formal attire greeted him as he retrieved his spectacles from the night stand. The photograph was taken during his coming out ball almost a year ago. His special glass jar, half-filled with messages stood beside the photograph. On Hermione's night stand, a similar jar stood next to a distorted vase and her favourite hair scrunchy. This was home - where there were constant reminders of the occupants of the house and that made him feel at ease. Harry walked to the wall facing the bed to check the large timetable and the to-do list and realised that they had only a task for the day - completing their last holiday assignment. With a smile, he began his own morning routine.

Dressed in comfortable jogging attire, Harry and Hermione were heading out for their usual run when they saw the Dursleys waiting impatiently for them at the foot of the stairs. From their grumpy expressions and dishevelled looks, it was not hard to arrive to the conclusion that someone had rudely awakened them from bed and coerced them to be here.

Hermione and Harry exchanged looks of surprise and Hermione turned to give Charles an enquiring look after exchanging greetings.

"I didn't think it was polite for the guests to be sleeping when the masters have awakened, my Lady." Charles responded politely. "A run around the estate would be good for their health, judging from the way the two Mister Dursleys were wheezing when they reached their room last night. It would also serve as a way to introduce them to the estate."

"Your ruddy thing placed us all the way on the other side of the house! I spotted empty rooms closer to the main building, why can't we have those?" Uncle Vernon complained loudly as he glared at Harry.

"He's not a 'thing'. Charles is a house elf," replied Harry edgily. "I will not have you standing here insulting my house elves unless you want to find yourself doing the work they do around here." Vernon's face turned plum and he looked as if he was about to launch into another tirade but Harry didn't give him a chance. "I've entrusted your care to Charles and I will not question his decisions. As I have told you before, house elves have their own brand of magic, you would do well not to cross them," warned Harry firmly.

Uncle Vernon kept his silence even though his face had become scarlet.

His cousin was far interested in his stomach than to concern himself about their living arrangements. Dudley yawned loudly as he stretched. "Are we going to have some breakfast now?" He demanded.

Harry shook his head as he answered. "No, since you're now living at my house, you'll have to stick with our schedule. We'll have our run before we have breakfast."

Vernon and Dudley's piggy eyes widened in shock at Harry's response. "Run?" They echoed.

"We don't have clothes to run in," interjected Uncle Vernon. His eyes were as wide as saucers at the thought of accompanying the youths for a jog around the large estate.

"That's never a problem here," answered Harry graciously. He drew out his wand, much to the mortification of the Dursleys. Dudley immediately ran behind his father, covering his large bottom with his hands.

"Don't you dare point that thing at us!" Uncle Vernon yelled as he stood protectively in front of his family.

Charles's large eyes narrowed into slits at the sight of the Dursleys trying to intimidate his master. When Vernon lunged forward to knock

the wand out of his hand,Vernon found himself knocked back by a low level elfish equivalent of a stun.

"I will not stand having you threaten the master of this house. As guests, you must always show respect to your host," admonished the elf as he glared at the purple-faced man. With his wife's help, he clumsily climbed onto his feet.

"Well, fine. You can run in your nightclothes. I'm sure Charles's not going to let you off the hook," replied Harry as he lowered his wand. Even to emphasise the fact, the house elf crossed his arms as he stared at them stonily.

"You're not going to hurt us?" Vernon questioned warily as he looked at Harry.

Harry kept his silence but gave him a pointed look.

"I'm just going to transfigure your clothes," Harry said before he cast the appropriate spells.

They let out a whimper of surprise when they saw that their night clothes had changed into sweat pants and shirts.

"Well, Charles. We'll see you later." Hermione said with a smile. The elderly house elf bowed and apparated away. The young couple took them through the exit to the grounds.

The grounds of the Potter Mansion looked equally beautiful during summer. The place was still enshrouded in darkness when they set foot on the grounds. The greenery was a striking contrast with the urban jungle that they'd gotten accustomed to for the past several weeks. There was an invigorating scent of nature lingering in the air and everything was still moist with the dew. Harry took a deep breath of the clean, unpolluted air and exhaled. It was wonderful to be back in the place untouched by modernisation. He felt completely unrestrained here. A feeling of serenity, evoked by the deep sense of rootedness washed over him, making him feel so alive. The beauty of nature was lost to the city dwellers who were so accustomed to the landscape of the bustling metropolis.

Harry and Hermione stretched their muscles properly in preparation for their jog and the Dursleys followed suit gawkily. They began a slow jog along the path circling the Mansion. The Dursleys, unused to such exertion, were wheezing hard from the jog. Their shirts were drenched with sweat and they looked quite pale. Harry and Hermione took pity on them and slowed down so that they could accompany them as they walked.

The Dursleys found it difficult to believe that they were now living in the Magical world since the Potter Mansion look like a normal house (albeit an enormous one), only it was located at the edge of a forest. They curiously pointed to the strange looking stadium looming in the corner of the grounds and were surprised at Harry's reply.

"Your bunch actually plays sports? I should have guessed - Witches on broomsticks." Vernon muttered breathlessly when Harry explained how Quidditch was played. Uncle Vernon was never interested in sports and therefore wasn't very concerned.

"It's difficult to imagine it but you'll get the gist when you watch it. You'll probably get to see a friendly match if my friends come over. We occasionally play a game or two." Harry responded as his face lit up at the prospect of feeling the wind in his face when he rode on his Firebolt again.

"Friends? It's hard to believe that someone would befriend a freak like you." Dudley retorted sarcastically as he panted hard.

"Don't bite the hand that feeds you." Hermione warned. "You're living at Harry's now. It would be pretty idiotic to make him mad."

Dudley shut his trap and lumbered on. The adult Dursleys were wise enough to see what kind of predicament they were in so they kept their silence as they finished their morning exercise. They headed back to their rooms for a shower before coming down to the dinning room for breakfast.

"Mummy!" Hermione greeted when she spotted her parents chatting with Oswald, Remus, and Sirius. Her face lit up immediately as she

wrapped her arms around her mother. Jean returned the hug with equal excitement, pleased to see that her little girl so happy.

There was a large smile on Dan's face as he lovingly ruffled Harry's messy hair as his son-in-law greeted him pleasantly. Sirius's eyes were dancing in amusement at the sight of Harry's even messier hair. When Dan turned to hug his daughter, Sirius immediately grabbed Harry around the neck and good-humouredly messed up his hair as well.

"Get off me, Sirius!" he laughed brightly as he weakly tried to fight his way out of his godfather's grip. Light-hearted laughter escaped his lips as he pretended to hustle with his godfather. Harry could have thrown him off if he wanted to - Toll had taught him to break such holds in the past. He had allowed himself to be held, seeing the joy it brought to his godfather.

"Sirius, you might choke him." Jean said disapprovingly.

Sirius happily let him go, giving Jean the opportunity to mother him. She lovingly hugged Harry after scrutinising him closely.

"I'm perfectly fine, mum. It has just been a few weeks." Harry playfully reminded.

"I know but I swear you've grown again," answered Jean. Jean continued to fuss over him for a while before she pressed a motherly kiss on his forehead and let him go. Harry greeted Remus and Oswald with hugs before settling at the table for their breakfast.

The Dursleys felt out of place, watching the young couple affectionately interact with their family as they entered the room. Dudley looked transfixed at the heart-warming sight as if he wished that he could belong to such a family. The other adults treated Harry well and it was clear that they were all very close. Uncle Vernon snorted and muttered some unpleasant comments under his breath but halted when he saw Charles glaring at him.

With all the greetings over, the adults finally noticed his relatives.

Vernon nearly fainted when he looked into the stern face of Lord Greengrass. His photograph had appeared often in magazines that featured rich and successful businessman. Clearly from his clothes, he was another wizard. They felt like specimens under careful examination from the attention they were receiving from the other occupants of the room. The elder Lord was scrutinizing the Dursleys carefully across the table.

"So these are Harry's relatives?" Remus questioned as he looked the Dursleys over. "She looks nothing like Lily."

Aunt Petunia frowned but said naught.

"I can see why Hagrid only needed to give him a tail," stated Oswald wryly as he stared at Dudley. Sirius and Dan sniggered at his remark. Dudley whimpered, covered his large bottom with his hands and hid behind his father.

"Charles forced them to join you for a run, pup? Must've been hard on you," Sirius remarked as he looked at Harry.

"It wasn't too bad - we just needed to jog really slowly," replied Harry.

The eyes of the adult Dursleys fell upon the only other non-magicals in the room, the Grangers, who were decked in office suits. They received reproaching glares from them in return. Dan glowered at Vernon when he tried to make small talk with him.

"They're here on Harry's request." Remus reminded gently as he leant closer to Dan.

The two dentists nodded grudgingly since they knew the reason for their presence.

Thinking that they have given enough attention to Harry's dreadful relatives, Sirius raised another subject. "Amelia's bringing Susan and Daphne later. They are totally bored at home." Sirius remarked when the empty plates on the table became full of piping hot and aromatic food. The Dursleys were surprised to see their plates magically fill.

Uncle Vernon raised his eyebrows as if expecting something besides the scramble eggs and pancakes that lay before him. He recalled from the fairy tales he had heard as a young child that magical beings ate something else.

"No, we don't eat strange things. We do use some of those exotic ingredients to make potions." Oswald answered matter-of-factly as he regarded him with slight amusement. Vernon was taken aback that Oswald could read his thoughts.

Dudley was delighted at the sight of a real breakfast and began to gobble the food down but was quickly shocked when a stick hit him sharply on his knuckle.

"Ouch!" Dudley yelled as he dropped his spoon in pain.

"That's not the proper way of eating, young man," admonished the elderly House elf sternly. "Are you a pig? You can't be because a pig has better manners than you. Chew your food first before putting in the next bite. How on earth did you survive so long with such appalling manners?"

Vernon jumped in shock when he found himself at the receiving end of the stick when he was slouching into his seat.

"Sit up straight!" Charles commanded in a no-nonsense voice.

Dudley and Vernon found themselves at the mercy of Charles as he picked on the many bad habits they had while they ate. Charles even gave Aunt Petunia a tongue-lashing about duties of the lady of the house. "How could you, Mrs. Dursley, allow such lack of etiquette in your household? It's disgraceful!" Charles pronounced as he hit Dudley on the knuckle for another mistake. He would hit them with a stick on every mistake they made, much to the enjoyment of the occupants of the table. It reminded Lupin of their younger days.

"I remember the times when Sirius was wacked by Charles for not having proper table manners. Charles has little patience for people who show no decorum at the table. Being a fledgling Lord didn't stop

Charles from instilling the proper etiquette into him. " Lupin grinned playfully as he looked at his friend.

"I'll never forget it. It's delightful to watch when I'm not at the receiving end of that stick." Sirius commented with a smile.

Vernon let out a yelp of pain when Charles hit him again. Charles reprimanded him firmly. It was amusing to watch Vernon fearful of a creature less than a quarter of his weight.

"I assume that my dad was taught to conduct himself as well?" questioned Harry as he looked at his father's best friends.

"Naturally, it gave us quite a shock how proper he was when we ate our first meal together. Well, he was brought up by Charles," answered Lupin as he smiled.

"I think Charles is looking forward to helping raise your children." Sirius added. "He was upset that he was unable to play a part in your upbringing."

The sounds of Aunt Petunia choking on her food distracted the occupants on the table His uncle's face had turned livid and was splattering food as he protested loudly.

"Harry's only fourteen!" Vernon groaned. "Why would he even be thinking of children?"

"Keep your mouth closed while you eat." Charles promptly lectured as he hit Vernon on his hand. Vernon looked as if he was going to start a tirade until he found himself at the end of his employer's glare. He rapidly closed his mouth as he focused on eating properly.

"Did you really think I wouldn't know the age of my godson, Dursley?" Sirius retorted in irritation.

"Of course not, sir." Uncle Vernon answered quietly as he focused his attention on eating his food. The occupants at the table save the Dursleys fell into a little conversation over breakfast. Harry and

Hermione periodically exchanged smiles with each other during the exchange. It was fantastic to be back at home with their family.

The Dursleys were coerced to follow Charles into the kitchen to wash the dishes when the adults departed for work, leaving the two teenagers alone in the dining room.

Harry affectionately wrapped his arm around her waist as he smiled. "I saw the to-do list - I guess we'll have to finish our homework," spoke Harry as he sipped his pumpkin juice.

"We're only left with History of Magic," replied Hermione dryly with a hint of grin on her lips as she glanced at her husband. "I know it's your least favourite subject, but after completing our O., it shouldn't be too much of a problem."

Harry had a look of distaste. "I never understood why we needed to sit through lessons about the Goblin rebellion again when we've already completed the entire Magical History at the House. I know Elissa always stress the importance of knowing about the past because it's a mirror of our world. This way, we can learn not to repeat the mistakes others before us have made."

"And you don't know why we needed to revisit the Goblin rebellion?" Hermione asked with a hint of amusement in her voice.

"Alright, I get it – but it still doesn't make it any more exciting," answered Harry as he frowned slightly. "We'll finish our homework today."

Hermione looked around furtively before curling her arms around his neck and pulling his head down so that their lips met in a kiss.

A goofy smile graced his features when she drew away. Her eyes were dancing with amusement when she led Harry upstairs to their study to complete their holiday assignment.

Harry was nearly bored out of his mind as he was writing his essay on the treaties the Goblins and Wizards had signed, but he finished it, albeit taking quite a long time. Hermione had completed her essay

and started reading a book as she waited for him to finish his final assignment. When Harry had finally completed his essay, Dobby appeared to announce the arrival of their friends.

Excited, the young couple hurried down the stairs into the sitting room where all their friends, dressed in robes of various colours, waited patiently for them. The group's newest couple were snuggling on the couch - Daphne was tucked into Cedric's side as he wrapped an arm around her. Neville, Susan, Luna, George, and Fred were sitting on the floor of the room chatting comfortably. The faces of the teenagers lit up when they saw Harry and Hermione entering the room.

They greeted one another enthusiastically with friendly claps on the back or hugs. There was a large grin on all their faces as they engaged in animated conversations. Hermione sat in a vacant armchair in the room while Harry sat on the arm.

"Uncle Oswald allowed you some time off today?" Harry asked Daphne as he slipped his arm around his wife's shoulders and Hermione leaned automatically into his embrace. It was something his friends were accustomed to seeing since the couple was in the privacy of their home.

Daphne smiled as she answered "We had wrapped up most of the meetings so he surprisingly allowed me to take the rest of the day off."

"Thank Merlin for that." Cedric added as he laid his head on hers, causing the others to chuckle.

Harry and Hermione kept in touch with all their friends during the holiday via their watches so they knew what they were up to during the summer. Luna had been busy exploring the country with her father in search of a rare magical creature that Hermione and Harry had never heard of. Susan spent most of her time learning the ropes of being a Head of House from her aunt and the house elf responsible for the Bones residence. Daphne, on the other hand, occupied her time with being the apprentice to her father, participating in the decision making processes of the companies the family owned. She was so busy that she hadn't had the time to see

Cedric at all. This was the first time that she'd seen him since holidays had started.

Neville was likewise occupied with his greenhouse and he was making headway on creating defences around the house using plants, besides keeping himself fit. Neville had a healthy glow and a lean body from his daily workouts. The Weasley twins were busy inventing new pranks and improving the ones that they had already created. They were excited to share their new products with their friends. Cedric, being a soon-to-be-seventh year, was busy with the great amount of holiday homework given by his Professors as well as preparing for his N.E.W.T.s. In their free time, the rest of their friends also completed their assignments. It was clear that Hermione had a profound influence on their study habits.

"How's your internship going, Sue?" asked Hermione as she looked at Susan. Since Amelia was dating Sirius, another Head of an Ancient family, with the possibility of marrying him in the near future, it was necessary that she groomed a successor.

"Auntie simply has had no time to give me proper lessons. She's been busy with the security issues since Quidditch World Cup has brought in a flock of wizards and witches from all over the world. However, the thing that has really got her worked up is the case of the missing witch who works at the Ministry. I mean she was supposed to be back at least a month ago from her trip to Albania but she's not been heard from since then," replied Susan.

Cedric and the Weasley twins grew interested in the topic instantaneously and did not notice the identical shocked looks on Harry and Hermione's faces.

"I think Dad mentioned something about it in passing. I think her name is Bethie something," Fred said.

George looked at his twin, bemused. "I thought her name was Bertha?"

"I was sure her name was Bethie," responded Fred as he folded his arms across his chest.

"It's Bertha Jorkins," answered Harry in a quiet voice. His friends exchanged looks of surprise when they saw that blood had been drained from his face.

Cedric's brows were drawn into a frown as he spoke. "How would you know her, Harry? I'm sure you've never met such a lowly Ministry worker."

"Yes, according to Dad, she was tossed from one department to another because she was considered to be a 'problematic worker'," added George.

"Yes," affirmed Susan. "That's why most people aren't concern about her whereabouts. However, my aunt said that it was too fishy for her to go missing just after Pettigrew had fled from Azkaban and she fears the worst."

His friends grew contemplative.

"How do you know her, Harry? Do you know what happened to her?" Cedric repeated the question gravely as he leaned forward to search Harry's face.

Harry swallowed visibly.

"I don't know her," Harry admitted as he averted his eyes. "but I dreamt of someone speaking her name." Harry concluded as he drew his hand through his hair uneasily. The thought of the cause of the pain in his scar made him ill at ease.

His friends eyed him closely, willing him to go on, but Harry became preoccupied with his thoughts.

"And do you know what happened to her?" questioned Susan in a quiet and trembling voice.

There was a sharp intake of breath. In a rush of words, Harry answered, "She's dead if my dream was true."

"What?"

His voice grew steadier and louder when he repeated, "Miss Jorkins is probably dead."

The room grew bizarrely silent.

"How?" Neville asked with a hint of fear in his voice.

Harry took a deep breath and he answered in a soft and solemn voice, "She was murdered by Lord Voldemort."

Their eyes widened anxiously at his answer. Harry searched their faces, trying to figure out what they were thinking as the room became painfully silent. His friends froze as they blanked out at the moment as their brain processed the information that Harry had given. Harry watched his friends anxiously for any signs of emotion on their faces.

Looks of comprehension flashed across their faces before they were replaced by looks of determination. Harry saw that they were willing to go the mile with him and it scared him speechless.

"I think it's imperative that you speak to Lady Bones about your dream as soon as possible," replied Cedric as he leaned forward and looked at Harry at the eye. "It's important to alert the Magical world about him."

A frown of confusion crossed Harry's face as he stared at each of his friends.

"The dream might be false," said Harry lamely.

"If both of you believe that she was murdered by You-Know-Who, then Lady Bones must be told." Cedric answered in an unusually firm voice and to Harry's surprise, everyone nodded their heads vigorously. Cedric immediately took control of the situation and requested Susan to call her Aunt. Lady Bones decided to meet them at the Potter Mansion during her lunch hour to hear them out instead of summoning them to her office.

"Do you even know what that means?" Harry demanded sharply as he gave each one of them a hard look. "I met Voldemort twice," began Harry and he was met with solemn faces as they waited patiently for him to continue. "Even as a fragment of a soul, he was able to cast spells and he wanted to use the killing spell on me. I believe that he was capable of doing it. He still has the ability to kill any of us at a blink of an eye."

He felt his wife slip a protective arm around him. He turned and saw the stubborn set of her chin.

"I'll be there with you this time," promised Hermione as her eye blazed with determination. Harry felt like protesting because he would be putting her in danger but seeing the resolve in her eyes, he could not help but give her leg a squeeze to express his heartfelt gratitude.

"I'm in too," quipped Luna cheerfully. "I guess I'll have to train harder."

Daphne and Susan exchanged looks before they answered, "We've a long standing pact to honour, Harry. You know we and our family will be fully supporting you."

Neville smiled as he replied, "You know that I'm in for sure."

"As Gryffindors, it's unnatural for us to back down from a fight, so count us in, Harrikins," said Fred as he grinned boyishly.

"You also know I'm with you." added Cedric with a sheepish smile. "I can teach you all everything that I know if you want."

Harry searched the faces of his friends and saw the sincerity in their words. Hermione gently squeezed his hand before he could dispute. Harry saw her shaking her head lightly and he understood.

"Thanks," he said hoarsely.

The smiles on his friends' faces widened.

"So, what do you think You-know-who is up to?" George asked as he looked at Harry and Hermione.

"The usual. He's been trying to get his body back. I don't think this will be an exception." Hermione answered thoughtfully as she recalled the times Harry met Tom. "He was after the Philosopher's stone because it brings immortality and Harry said that he became more solid when he was draining Ginny's life force."

"So Harry thwarted his attempts at coming back to life twice? You-Know-Who has been inside Hogwarts twice?" Susan questioned incredulously.

"Hogwarts isn't as safe as we think," explained Luna calmly.

Harry looked uncomfortable, "It's twice if you count the memory in the book."

"So I guess we'll need to start training soon." Cedric smiled as he looked around. "We don't have to worry about having nothing to do for the rest of summer break."

"I thought you'd be busy preparing for your N.E.? Why do you still need things to occupy your time?" Fred teased.

"Unlike you, we're very busy people," continued George in mock-seriousness.

Susan arched an eyebrow as she exchanged looks with Daphne.

"I'm sure. Because where would we all be if we didn't have your pranks at school?" Susan spoke as she laid her hand dramatically on her heart and put on a pitiful expression causing the occupants in the room to laugh.

Amelia briskly strode into the dining room during lunch, already looking frazzled from her day. Susan helpfully supplied her with a goblet of pumpkin juice as she sat at the table. There was a look of relief on Amelia's face as she took a sip of her drink and relaxed into

the seat. The other teenagers made their out of the dining room after they finished the meal, leaving Harry and Hermione with her.

At the sound of the last of the footsteps fading, Amelia began to speak.

"I don't have much time but Susan said that you may know something about Jorkins' disappearance?" Amelia questioned firmly as she looked at Harry. "How did you get your information?"

She listened patiently as Harry shared with her a portion of the dream he'd had a few nights earlier. Her brows drew into a frown as she paid serious attention to the details Harry was giving her.

"So, you've never heard of her until you had this dream?" Amelia repeated in bewilderment.

"Yes," answered Harry. Amelia looked at Hermione and she nodded in affirmation.

"Sirius did express his concern that Pettigrew might have returned to serve the Dark Lord. Did you have any such dreams before? Was that the entire conversation?" Amelia asked as she watched him closely.

"It was the first dream I've had that was like this. They were talking about their plans briefly and I have no idea where they are."

Amelia rubbed her temple gently. "Jorkins is the nosy type. The Dark Lord would have gathered a lot of information from her because we are in the midst of preparing for several events. Did you know what his objective is?"

"He wants me," answered Harry as he looked at her. "They mentioned me by name and he said he would have no other but me."

Her face became ashen white as she collapsed into her seat. She regained the colour of her face quickly and called for her house elf. She instructed Tiggy to go to the Ministry to inform that she was indisposed for the rest of the day before proceeding to call Sirius and

Oswald. She asked Charles to inform Professor McGonagall to expect them in an hour.

"I sort of expected something like this ever since Pettigrew went missing. The problem is that we don't know how much information she actually had. She'd know of the other event the Ministry will be hosting since we've been preparing for almost a year. I'll need you to tell us every single detail of the dream when we meet with Minerva," said Amelia as she drew her hand through her hair. "I think I'll have to send all the Aurors back into training in preparation of the Dark Lord's rising. There's so much that can change within a span of a few months and I don't want to take the chance of being caught unprepared. I could capitalise on the Pettigrew's escape as a reason to further their training." Amelia pondered as she tapped her fingers impatiently on the table.

It was only minutes later when Remus, Sirius, and Oswald arrived, looking frayed from hurrying from their offices. Sirius was dressed in the plum robes of the Wizengamot with large silver 'W' on his chest. He hurriedly brushed off the dust from his robes. Remus Lupin was dressed in plain black work robes, no doubt, busy researching when Sirius called him. Oswald was dressed in a navy blue robe and he looked rather weary

The adults sat down at the dining table with a cup of tea as they regained their breath while Harry went upstairs to retrieve the account of the dream he'd made that night.

They all apparated to the castle with the help of their house elves.

Professor McGonagall was already waiting for them at stairs leading to her office when they reached Hogwarts. "Good afternoon, Professor." They greeted.

"Good afternoon, this way please," said Professor McGonagall gravely as she gave the password that allowed them entrance. The office looked homier than they had remembered. Professor McGonagall led them to the sitting area. "Is something wrong? I was quite alarmed by the urgency of the message." Professor McGonagall

questioned after conjuring snacks and tea and offering them to her guests.

"Yes," answered Amelia and she looked at Harry and Hermione. "I'll let Harry explain." Harry took the cue and began sharing with them the entire dream in detail. He was met with silence when he finished with the dream.

"Your scar usually hurts only when Voldemort is around and it hurt after you had the dream?" Sirius asked solemnly as he rubbed his chin contemplatively.

"Yes."

The headmistress expelled a breath. "It is clear that he knows about the competition that is taking place at Hogwarts. Even though we've expended a lot of energy to plan for the event, I'm willing to call it off if it's going to put my students in danger."

"I believe there is no need to call off the event. In face of fear, all the more we should live to conquer it. I believe it would benefit the students in the long run if they could make friends through this competition. Who did you employ for the post of Defence against Dark Arts?" Oswald asked.

"I've asked Alastor Moody. Ever since the duel between Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley, it's clear that our students need to learn defend themselves. We decided to ask Moody to teach the students a thing or two about combat." Professor McGonagall answered as she sipped her tea.

"He's an excellent choice as a teacher. I think the students will be in for a unique time," remarked Remus as he chuckled.

"You'll have to keep a close eye on the staff," spoke Oswald. "We have no idea who this faithful servant can be."

"Yes," agreed Professor McGonagall as she frowned. "I personally trust all my staff but the Dark Lord has always been sly, I'll keep my eyes open. I'll also strengthen the wards surrounding Hogwarts."

"Perhaps, I can ask several of my trusted Aurors to be here whenever you hold any of the events. I know that all games are not open to public but I don't want to take any chances."

"I'll be grateful for any help," answered Professor McGonagall with a hint of appreciation.

"We could wait until the Quidditch World Cup is over before we make our move since it's clear that the Dark Lord won't attempt anything this soon," suggested Remus as he read the recount of the dream.

"That will be good. I believe we'll need to train the kids as well – they'll probably be in the thick of things." Sirius said as he looked at Harry and Hermione.

"Yes, all of them will definitely need training. Does Hogwarts focus much on teaching them about the practical side of Defence against the Dark Arts?" Oswald questioned as he turned to look at Remus.

"Not really. They will definitely not be up to scratch if they're going against the Dark Lord. I don't mind giving them extra lessons for the rest of the holidays during my free time." Lupin replied as a smile graced his features.

"I can offer them lessons as well, if Remus feels that they are ready for some Auror training." Amelia added with a smile. Harry brightened up at the prospect of receiving the same training all Aurors have to undergo.

"I can always request Moody to continue with their training once they are back in school." Professor McGonagall suggested.

"Great, so that settles it for now. Remus will start their lessons as soon as possible." said Oswald.

"If there is nothing else, I need to speak to Mr .and Mrs. Potter alone." Professor McGonagall spoke as she peered at her two favourite students through her squared-rimmed spectacles.

"I'm his godfather and his legal guardian." Sirius protested loudly.

With a firm voice, Professor McGonagall answered, "Mr. and Mrs. Potter are adults so they can make their own decisions."

Seeing Professor McGonagall would not compromise, Sirius reluctantly left the students alone as he joined Amelia, Remus, and Oswald outside.

"I want to speak to you regarding your education, Mr. and Mrs. Potter. Will you be doing the sixth year curriculum instead of doing your fourth year work?" Professor McGonagall asked.

Harry and Hermione exchanged looks. "Do we have to do both if we wanted to take our N.E. by our fifth year?" Hermione returned.

"No, I can make an exception for you. I have gathered feedback from your examiners and there was nothing but glowing praises." Professor McGonagall answered as the corners of her lips lifted to form a rare smile. Harry and Hermione smiled at each other. "Would you two like to graduate early?" Professor McGonagall continued.

"No, Professor. We want to graduate during seventh year if with the rest of our class if it's possible. All we want to make sure of is that we have at least knowledge of a graduate when we face Voldemort," answered Harry.

Professor McGonagall shuddered at the casual use of his name but said nothing.

"I think that's a prudent idea." Professor McGonagall replied thoughtfully as she set down her tea cup. "I think it would be better if you'll take periodic tests to ensure that you're of the same level as the sixth years, instead of sitting those classes. I do feel that you should take a few extra hours of additional instruction to keep you up to speed, but not in the same manner as last year. I believe it was very taxing juggling so much work at the same time." Professor McGonagall answered.

"Well, we have each other." Harry replied with a dazzling smile as he looked at his wife. "We'd be happy to do as you suggested."

"Yes, Professor, we'll be happy to do the tutoring and periodic tests," added Hermione.

"Very well. Enjoy the rest of your holidays. I'll let you know about the extra lessons when I've checked it with Professor Moody and the rest of your Professors." Professor McGonagall bade.

"Thank you, Professor McGonagall." Harry answered as he offered a hand to Hermione and joined the adults at the waiting area outside the office.

"Professor McGonagall wanted to speak to about our education. She offered us a chance to join the sixth years." said Harry when he saw his godfather.

"Really? It's unheard of! You both must've done spectacularly on your examinations!" said Sirius proudly as he placed arms around them.

Remus chuckled in amusement. "I expected them to. They were brilliant in my class. Let's head back."

They summoned their house elves to bring them back to Potter Mansion. They immediately gathered in the living room to discuss about the issue. The adults shared their plans with all the teenagers and the rationale behind them. To their surprise, all the kids heartily agreed to do the training instead of using the time to relax and enjoy their summer. Neville instantly used the fireplace to contact his grandmother and ask for permission to stay for the rest of the holidays. Cedric and Luna asked a house elf to bring them home to ask their parents for their consent. Harry knew that his friends were supportive of him however; the idea of his friends being enthusiastic to do anything to keep him safe was something new to him. Harry felt undeserving of such fierce loyalty.

"If you knew that we were in danger, what would you do, Harry?" inquired Susan as she stared at him.

"I would do everything to protect..." Harry understood the point she was making and nodded in gratitude.

Cedric and Luna soon returned with their parents' consent and Remus immediately brought the teenagers upstairs to the gym for their first lessons in advanced magic. Harry updated him on the skills that they were currently learning. Lupin was pleased that they were at least physically fit for combat.

To see how much they actually knew, Remus paired them off to spar. Luna, Susan, Daphne and Neville showed that they had some basic knowledge on low level sparring spells but lack accuracy. Lupin noted that they were very agile and could dodge effectively by rolling away or side-stepping incoming spells. They also had the physical stamina to run around and it was clear that their lessons in self-defence and constant running were paying off as they managed to integrate certain elements into their sparring. Daphne trumped Luna by disarming her suddenly when the younger girl was distracted by another spell. Susan beat Neville when she conjured a shield, deflecting Neville's stun back him. He ducked but was disarmed in a heartbeat.

"I think we really need to work on the spells," Remus said as he looked at them. "It's clear that you know some simple hexes and simple duelling spells. Fred, why don't you try it with Hermione?"

Fred eyed her closely as they bowed. He couldn't help but feel unsettled facing Hermione. It was a thrilling match since both of them became very innovative with the spells but clearly Hermione was not putting her all into the match. In terms of knowledge of spells, experience and magical capacity, she was far better than him. Finally, the match ended when Hermione used an "Everte Statum" to send Fred flying before summoning his wand easily into her hand.

"That was a good match. Both of you used switching spells and conjuration to aid you effectively. The spell that Hermione used at the end is rather useful." Remus answered as Hermione healed the cut Fred received much to Remus' amazement.

George and Cedric went up against each other next. Cedric was more original at casting spells and clearly far more experienced than George. However, George did put up a good fight against him but everything ended when Cedric cast 'Impedimenta' on George causing him to slow down before binding him with ropes.

Remus ended spell with a flick of his wand.

"That was some quick spell-work, Cedric" Lupin praised. "I guess we really need to work on building your bank of spells. Harry, it's your turn now. You're up against me." He replied grimly.

Harry's eyes widened in shock but he followed his instructions.

Harry climbed onto the duelling platform and readied himself for the match. They did the usual routine as everyone in the room watched the match closely. They bowed when they faced each other. "Protego!" Harry shouted as he saw Remus firing a stun at him just scant seconds after they finished bowing. It was evident that Lupin was playing to his strengths of a werewolf. Remus leapt safely away when he saw Harry firing a cutting spell back at him. Harry realised that his werewolf reflexes and sense were an advantage in such a duel. He rolled to the side when he heard Lupin shouting a full body bind curse.

Harry knew he could not win him if they were going to go head-to-head physically. He was left with two options - he could either beat him with his full magical capacity or beat him by outwitting him. Harry chose the latter since it was less draining on him.

"Lumos maximus!" Harry shouted as he pointed straight at Lupin. Remus was blinded by the light and backed away as he covered his eyes with an arm. "Immobulus" He fired and Remus became still. Harry ended the spell and helped him up.

"That was a creative way of using Lumos." Lupin smiled. "Are you sure you need practice?"

"I don't mind more practice, Uncle Moony. You've got very fast reflexes." Harry commented with a smile.

"I would like to see you and Hermione duel though," suggested Fred. "She seems to be very good at it."

"She is very good, so don't try duelling with her unless you want to get your arse kicked." answered Harry with a smile as he retracted his wand into his holster. He leapt away when Hermione playfully fired a jet of water at him. His brows shot into his hairline as he began to chase after Hermione, firing jets of water at her. It started a water fight since it was a simple spell they were familiar with and it tested their accuracy and reflexes. Everyone began shooting water at one another as they ducked the jets of water.

"Hey!" Daphne shouted when Cedric playfully fired a jet of water at her. "I'll get you." She promised as she dashed after the towering seeker. The Weasley twins got into a two-versus-three fight with Neville, Susan, and Luna. The seekers began to display their ability by shooting jets of water while leaping or rolling across the floor. Drenched completely, the teenagers collapsed onto the floor, only Remus was dry since he was really good at ducking due to his werewolf senses.

"Alright, we're going to start on some simple spells. Dry up and we're formally starting our lesson," said Lupin as he summoned a book of simple hexes to his hand.

"You mean it's not over?" The Weasley twins groaned good-naturally. They cast drying charms on themselves before officially beginning their lessons at disarming.

Most of the teenagers were tired to the bone as they trooped downstairs for a meal. Remus wanted to stretch their magical capacity to the maximum so that it could increase. He explained to them that magic was like a muscle that needed to be exercised constantly so that their magical endurance could increase. Thus, the power they can put into and the time they can hold their spells could increase as well.

Despite their weariness, the Weasley twins managed to add some dinner entertainment by pulling a prank on the Dursleys when they

joined them for dinner. The four Ancient families were there, along with the Grangers.

The prank was identical to the one they played on Dumbledore in the Great Hall. There was a scream when Dudley transformed into a large cow right before their very eyes. The clothes on his back transformed into the prints on his large body, making him really unusually looking for a cow. He was at least twice the size of a normal cow because of his size and his eyes were wide with fear when he realised that he mooed whenever he opened his mouth. Before Uncle Vernon could protest and demand that they put him right, he transformed into a small chicken. His furious words became a torrent of incomprehensible clucking that sent most of the occupants on the table laughing. Naturally, the only person who did not laugh was Aunt Petunia. She merely gasped as she stared at her husband and her son.

They howled in laughter as the cow and the chicken desperately tried to leave the dining room as quickly as they could. Aunt Petunia accompanied them back to their rooms, lamenting about her "Diddy Darling."

"I bet Arthur is going to reprimand you both when he hears what you've done but that was a great trick." Sirius said as he winked at the twins.

"It was a just slip of our hand," Fred answered innocently as he lifted up the empty vial of potion and performed the act of pouring. The occupants around the table chuckled light at his answer.

"How long will that last?" Sirius questioned with mild interest.

"Overnight." George answered with a smile. "They will transform into whatever they ate. Our esteemed Professor Dumbledore tested our product. He became a giant pumpkin and a chicken."

Luna began to regale them with what happened during that incident and had the adults howling with laughter.

"It was wonderful - I was able to witness that firsthand!" Lupin grinned as he wiped a tear off his eye. The two Marauders began sharing ways to improve that particular prank as the others listened with interest. Dinner was a lively affair as they excitedly swapped stories.

The next few days passed in a similar fashion. Everyone, including the adults, would join Harry and Hermione for a run around the estate before breakfast, seeing that running kept them in such great shape. The Dursleys knew better not to protest and joined them reluctantly every morning. Harry and Hermione discovered that the Dursleys were not the only ones who needed time to adapt to the cardio-exercise, wizards were much too accustomed to the use of magic to have a physical workout. As a result, the adult wizards were also tired after each run.

After they had their breakfast and the adults left for work, the teenagers proceeded to have their Occlumency and self-defence lessons. After Remus Lupin's assignments were completed, they would either play Quidditch or just lounge around the large mansion, enjoying the splendid weather the summer brought. They had a lot of combat practice and quite a bit of reading to prepare for Remus' lessons.

Their lesson would traditionally start with a spar that required them to use what they'd previously learned against a different partner each time. Lupin would evaluate the action and gave them pointers in order to help them improve. He was surprised that Harry and Hermione seemed to catch on to everything quickly as though they were already seasoned duellers. Occasionally, they would have a mass water fight in different locations to learn other lessons - like manipulating the environment and honing their ability to adapt to various situations.

There was certain modification to the mass water fights- they had to shoot coloured jets of water. Daphne naturally picked neon green. Susan chose canary yellow. Fred picked silver in honour of his 'real' house and George, blood red. George even thickened it so that it looked like real blood. It was quite a strange sight whenever George shot his bloody red coloured water on them because they looked as though they were bleeding. Harry picked chocolate brown and

Hermione selected scarlet red. Cedric selected baby blue, Luna chose the shade of rainbow and Neville chose dirty green. The results of these fights were hilarious- the victims would be walking canvases of a variety of bright colours. The Weasley twins would usually be drenched with the many colours since they were easy targets.

After that, they would break for their own individual lessons. Susan continued her lessons on becoming Head of her household, while Daphne continued being her father's apprentice. The Weasley twins, Neville, and Luna went on with their own respective projects. Harry and Hermione spent most of the time tending to their duties and learning the ropes from Oswald, Amelia, and Sirius so that they could prepare to assume more duties as Lord and Lady of an Ancient and Noble House. Meanwhile Cedric busied himself with practising and researching more useful spells for battle.

The teenagers, accompanied by the Grangers and the Dursleys, went to Diagon Alley to pick up their things for the new year. Charles had followed along with the sole objective of watching over the Dursleys.

Diagon Alley was quite a sight for first-time visitors. Harry smiled when he saw the awe in his relatives' faces as they set their eyes on Diagon Alley- they reminded him of his first time at Diagon Alley.

"There is much we need to buy today. I think we'll get new sets of uniform first," commented Hermione as she checked her list.

"Let's split up then, I'm heading to Flourish and Blotts to purchase the reading material Lupin has assigned us for our lessons and my supplementary readings. Do you need anything?" questioned Cedric.

"No, I think we'll meet you there. I'm sure we would want to pick up more books for leisure reading," answered Harry as he looked at Hermione.

"I'm heading to the joke shop. My mom's helping us to purchase our things for school," answered Fred.

"Yes, I wonder if they had new products," remarked George.

"We'll meet you at Flourish and Blotts," Fred continued. They bid them farewell before walking towards the joke shop.

"I need to get new sets of uniform too, so I'll stick with you," added Susan.

"My grandmother would help me to purchase my things when the Hogwarts letter comes. I'm heading over to look at the plants and Luna's accompanying me," said Neville. "We'll meet Flourish and Blotts. I need some new books too."

Daphne and Cedric went off alone after seeing that everyone else had their own plans.

Harry looked at his parents-in-law "Will you be alright without us?"

Dan cast a side glance at the Dursleys and spoke, "I think we'll be fine. I'll just grab some drinks from the pub. Your uncle don't seem to be too excited being in here."

Harry shrugged nonchalantly. "He's just petrified by the 'strangeness' of everything." Uncle Vernon was staring at the potion ingredients on display.

Jean smiled warmly, "We'll be. Have fun."

The teenagers split up and went their own ways. Harry was once again fascinated by the shop that carried Quidditch related items. In lieu of the Quidditch World Cup, moving portraits of outstanding Quidditch players were put on display. Harry watched with great fascination, the nimble way the youngest professional seeker flew his Firebolt.

"That's Victor Krum. We'll probably be seeing him play since the Bulgarian team is quite strong," remarked Susan when she saw what Harry was looking at.

"England was recently thrashed so we won't be able to see the English team in the finals," added Susan as she pulled him away from the shop.

Harry, Hermione and Susan made their way to Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions to purchase their robes for school. It was clear that Susan had opted to be with them to give the new couple some time alone since she only purchased a new dress robe.

"Don't you think we deserve some time alone too, Sue?" questioned Harry with mock sternness when it became clear to them.

"Both of you had your time alone in the early weeks of the summer holiday," returned Susan.

"Well, it doesn't mean I won't want to spend more time with Hermione," answered Harry pointedly.

Hermione laughed brightly as she watched the exchanged of words between her husband and her good friend. "Harry, you're being silly. Sue told us that she had made a trip to Diagon Alley on the second day she was back from the summer holidays. It was clear from the start that she wanted to give Daphne and Cedric some time alone when she said she wanted to tag along."

"This is a good example why you're the brightest witch in the century," commented Harry with a smile.

They stopped to purchase refills for their stationeries and snacks for their pets.

They met at Flourish and Blotts to purchase their reading materials for their lessons with Lupin. Hermione noted that the books that Uncle Moony had advised were all written by their new Defence against Dark Arts teacher, Alastor Moody.

"Alastor Moody seems to be a well-esteemed authority on Defence against Dark Arts," remarked Hermione contemplatively as she stared at the book.

"Yes, he is. He's a retired Auror. He's one of the finest the Ministry has ever seen. Aunt has nothing but glowing praises for his skills. He's the one responsible for putting most of the Death Eaters in Azkaban," answered Susan.

"He's a bit odd though so he has a nickname- Mad-eye Moody," added Fred.

"Odd or not, we're going to see him often because he's our new Professor," answered Harry.

After purchasing all their things, they went back to Leaky Cauldron to meet the Grangers. In all, it was a productive trip and they were very happy with their buys. The Dursleys looked slightly subdued for some strange reasons but Hermione and Harry chose not to pursue the matter.

In the office of the Potter Mansion, Harry sat alone, speaking to his godfather via the watch.

"Have you completed all that I've asked you to do?" Harry whispered as he cast furtively glances around the room. Even though he had cast the correct spells to ensure his privacy, he was fearful that she would still walk into the room.

There was a light-hearted chuckle from his godfather.

"I'm no stranger to doing such favours - your father used to drag me into his grand schemes when he didn't want your mum to find out."

"It wouldn't be called a surprise if she knew about it, would it?" Harry rebuked as he frowned.

"Alright, pup. Relax, I've got it done. Everything will run smoothly tomorrow." Sirius assured with a smile. "Just remember, it's the thought that counts."

Harry was going to refute the statement when he heard voices. In a hurry, he concluded the conversation. "I've got to go. Thanks, Sirius!"

A/N: HAPPY New year in advanced. I'm sorry for the late update. I went for a holiday then I was busy with my new job. Thank you for all the glowing reviews. I hope you'll have a great holiday.

Chapter 25

Beta-read by Frust8dwriter

Her long slim fingers gently traced the two faces in the large portrait hanging prominently above the large four-poster bed. The unmoving portrait captured the most beautiful moment of their private wedding held exactly a year ago in the garden of her modest family residence. It was a portrait of them sharing their first kiss as husband and wife.

Hermione smiled.

The sight of her wedding portrait caught her attention at once and she didn't have time to take a look at her room. Stepping back, she gave her room a critical look and she was glad that her room was still exactly the way they had left it.

Their second year texts were stacked neatly on the brown dressing table standing at the corner of the room. The bookshelves above her desk were neatly filled with books of all genres in the strange order she had placed them. American literature was mixed with British literature so that the bookshelves would have more space to hold duplicate copies of the entire set of books. It was a good thing that they had decided to get rid of Lockhart's books because that took up a lot of space. A smile appeared on her face when she realised that her books were dust free - her mother must have cleaned her room often. Her nightstand was awkwardly filled with stacks of books in the exact position she had left them.

Every corner of the room echoed Harry and her presence. There were two chairs standing close to each other at the desk by the window. They reminded her of the frequent accidental body contact when they had shared a desk to study together. It was the only way they could focus on their homework since it was still the early period of their bonding. Hermione glanced at her nightstand and recalled the reason of the strange positioning of books - it was to make some space for Harry's glasses. Harry would pass them to her when they

turned in for the night and she would pass them back to him every morning.

Sunlight was streaming through the open window, lighting up the place. Hermione threw herself onto her bed, her brown wavy hair sprawling around her as she lay on her back. Staring at the pale lilac ceiling, she recalled the countless afternoons spent lying on the bed the same way as they talked about anything that tickled their fancy. Often, they would read late into the night and would get too engrossed with their books that they would have to remind each other to turn in earlier.

It was surprisingly easy for them to live with each other despite hearing tales of other married couples that found it difficult to get used to living together. However, they seemed to be able to find a pattern of living that fit them quite well. One wonderful and exciting year had passed since their souls had entwined, but it felt like it had only been a week ago since they'd spoken their vows.

Life with Harry was never dull, she mused as she smiled.

She let out a sigh suddenly - Harry had not given her any indications that he remembered what day it was, so she didn't know if she should give him the anniversary gift she had for him. Earlier that morning, Hermione found herself wandering back to her family home subconsciously after finishing her duties. Since she was already there, she decided to go up to her old room.

It was time for breakfast and she was sure that she would be missed if she did not show up in the dining room. Giving her old room a final cursory glance, she closed the door behind her and hurried back to the Potter Mansion.

Breakfast was, as usual, a lively affair. The absence of the Dursleys was well noted by all - they had left right before breakfast. Harry was being unusually quiet - participating only in conversations when they involved him directly. He had also kept his thoughts to himself by putting up a mental barrier between him and his wife.

Hermione noticed his quirky behaviour and was worried about him. However, before she could speak to him, there was a sudden disruption. The fluttering of wings announced the arrival of four large tawny owls. She watched with surprise as one of the owls dropped a letter addressed to 'Hermione Jane Potter' in front of her. Harry had an identical look of astonishment as he caught the letter addressed to him nimbly in his hand. The conversations rapidly ceased when the occupants in the room noticed the recipients of the regal envelopes - Harry, Hermione and the Weasley twins.

"It's today?" Hermione questioned in a quivering voice.

The four teenagers exchanged uncomfortable looks between themselves as they set their cutlery down slowly.

The letters could only contain the results of their Ordinary Wizarding Levels.

"Might as well get it over with," commented Fred as he swallowed visibly. George gave a curt nod as he carefully picked up the letter as if it was a dangerous object.

"I don't know if I can. If we did badly, I can't even imagine how Mom will react." George admitted as he dropped the letter on the table and slumped into his seat.

"Nice Gryffindor courage you have there," replied Fred wryly.

George grew indignant and pointed out angrily. "You should talk! You haven't even touched your letter yet."

"That's because not even Gryffindor courage would save me from Mom if I did poorly." Fred replied factually as he sighed aloud. He received no sympathy from his friends since they were laughing at his answer.

Daphne leaned closer to Cedric and whispered, "Oh, I don't know, love. Looks like you may not have been as good a tutor as you thought. Your students are certain that they've done badly."

Cedric shrugged and answered, "Well, it could be my teaching skills but I wasn't given much to work with in the first place. They were already terrible when I first began to help them."

Susan, who was sitting beside Cedric, began laughing exuberantly.

Across the table, like her friends, Hermione was queasy with nervousness - she felt as if there were butterflies flying wildly in her stomach. She was afraid to open her letter just like the Weasley twins.

"You probably did well, Hermione. In fact, I'm sure you'll be weeping with joy at your excellent results," spoke Luna dreamily as she patted her friend's hand in an assuring manner. The rest of their friends voiced their agreements heartily.

"Naturally, since you've worked harder than Fred and George for sure," added Susan with a smirk.

"Well, O. don't determine your life," protested Fred. "There is more than life than just examinations."

"Then why don't you just open it?" challenged Daphne coolly.

"I would love to, but my hands don't seem to be responding," answered Fred sadly as he held up his trembling hands.

Cedric ignored the jokers and turned to Hermione.

"Well, take as much time as you need. I've been there and done that. I think it's better to just get it over with so that you don't worry about it the rest of the day," advised Cedric.

Hermione gave Harry a feeble smile as she looked over at him. Even though he seemed unfazed and looked as though he was immune to this nerve-wracking situation; inside, he was just as uneasy as her.

His heart fluttered in excitement and trepidation as he fingered his letter and he felt that he was doing a good job keeping a tight control over his emotions. Unlike the Weasley twins, he assured himself, he and Hermione had a second chance if for some reason they did badly.

He flashed a small smile before opening his letter with trembling hands.

Ordinary Wizarding Levels

Passing grades

Outstanding (O)

Exceeding Expectations (E)

Acceptable (A)

Failing grades

Poor (P)

Dreadful (D)

Troll (T)

Harry James Potter has achieved:

His eyes widened in shock. The result slip fell as he collapsed into the seat.

He blinked continuously as he allowed his results to sink in.

Dazed, he felt his wife flinging her arms around him as she threw herself on top of him. The impact caused them to crumple to the ground as Harry held her close.

Excited, Hermione announced, "I've an E for Divination and Os for the rest of my subjects!" The rest of the room burst into a resounding round of applause.

"Merlin's beard, you're barking mad," exclaimed Fred loudly.

"That's really insane. How in Merlin's name did you get that many outstanding O.?" George declared over the loud cheering.

"She's undeniably the brightest witch in this century." Cedric said with a bright grin. Everyone took turns to hug Hermione and express their joy at her good results. It was clear from her parents' eyes that they were exceptionally proud of her and Harry smiled at the way her eyes sparkled with bliss as she talked.

When they were finished with congratulating Hermione, she remembered that Harry had also seen his results.

"Harry, how did you fare?" Hermione asked as she looked at him with eyes full of concern.

They became quiet at once. Time seemed to have stood still. The silence was unnerving.

After a long quiet pause, Harry cleared his throat, opened his mouth but swallowed his words again.

The wait was staring to worry them as they eyed Harry warily. He appeared ill at ease and even edgy.

He lowered his head when he caught sight of the anticipation written over her face. "Well, I did very well on History of Magic," said Harry solemnly as he averted his eyes. "I got an E for it."

"That's wonderful, Harry! How were the rest of your subjects?" Jean asked patiently. "I mean it's alright if you didn't fare as well on the rest. We know that you've tried your best and that's good enough. After all, you do have a second shot at it."

"Yes," added Sirius as his shoulders sagged in dismay.

"Well, I must say I'm surprised but you're juggling with a lot of work, so don't be too hard on yourself," remarked Lupin as he gave an encouraging smile.

A smile cracked his facade.

"I don't think there is a need for all the concern. I've got Os for my other eleven subjects."

"Did you say eleven?" Cedric echoed in awe. "I can't believe you took all the subjects Hogwarts had to offer."

Sirius mischievously caught him under his arm and ruffled his hair. "Why you! You had us worried for a moment! Congratulations, pup!" The rest of his friends and his family let out a collective sigh of relief. Jean lightly reprimanded him about worrying them and hugged him happily. They were very proud of their children's accomplishments.

Hermione gave him an admonishing look but she pulled him into a congratulatory hug.

"Well done, Harry," praised Lupin. "I knew you could do it."

The adults fussed about him for a while before they remembered the Weasley twins.

"Well, Harry and Hermione have already seen their results. Isn't it about time you two got your results?" Sirius asked impatiently.

"I'm sure we didn't do as well as them. Barking mad, they've gotten 24 O. between them. This is it, I suppose?" remarked Fred. He took deep breaths to compose himself.

The Weasley twins began opening their letters as the rest of them waited anxiously.

They sat there, numb with shock and disbelief.

"So how was it?"

After what it seems like eternity, Fred finally spoke, "I've scraped about Es and As."

George flashed a lop-sided smile, "I don't think Mom can protest any longer with my results. I've gotten 8, but Fred has more Es than me. "

"That's fantastic! Well done!"

"We couldn't have done it without Cedric's help," added Fred with a grin. They remembered the way Cedric tore his hair when he realised that the twins had missed so many classes because they had spent just too much time on inventing new pranks and testing them out. Harry and Hermione would have made good studying partners but they had their hands tied with their duties and schoolwork.

"They were awful when I first began tutoring them – they were always distracted and could not focus," teased Cedric. "I'm amazed that you two scraped that many passes" His remark earned a playful punch on the arm from both of the twins. The others offered heartily congratulations to them. The Weasley twins soon excused themselves so that they could send an owl to their mother informing her of the good news.

"This is simply wonderful! Shall we all go out to dinner and celebrate later this evening?" asked Oswald with a hint of smile as he searched the faces in the room. It was met with enthusiastic nods.

"That's a splendid idea but I believe someone has already made plans for the evening," commented Sirius with a playful smirk. Some of them widened their eyes in surprise when they saw Harry hit him on the arm. "It just gives you more reasons to celebrate."

Jean and Dan exchanged amused looks.

"But his birthday isn't until three days from now," commented a bemused Neville as he glanced around the table for some answers. It was clear from the clueless expressions of his friends that none of them knew the reason why Harry and Hermione were going to celebrate on their own.

A look of realisation dawned upon Hermione as she covered her mouth in surprise.

"You remembered?" exclaimed Hermione as she looked at Harry enquiringly.

Harry let out a chuckle as he gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "How could I possibly forget? We've been together for one amazing year," added Harry with a gentle smile. "I'm looking forward to more wonderful years with you." He leant in and kissed her lightly on her cheek. "It's too bad that someone just doesn't understand the meaning of surprise," remarked Harry dryly as he shot a glare at his laughing godfather.

He gave his godson an apologetic look.

"You could also celebrate the change in your relatives. I think Charles did a marvellous job with them - their attitudes towards the magical world have certainly become better," suggested Sirius.

"Yes," answered Harry as he became lost in his own thoughts - the Dursleys had surprised him twice with their change in attitude before they left the mansion that morning.

(Flashback)

Harry was in his office, his brows furrowed into a frown, as he carefully perused the documents Dobby handed to him. He was in the midst checking through mail and doing some paperwork since it was the time of the month to check the progress of all the firms he owned. Usually, he would leave it to the end of the month to finish this work, but with their anniversary and the Quidditch Finals coming up, he was not sure if he had time to address all his estate business before school started on the first of September.

Hermione and Harry had awakened really early that morning to have their run before they had to split up to attend to their respective duties. Hermione, just like him, had much to take care of since she was the mistress of a large mansion. Harry was sure that she'd said something about looking into the maintenance of some of the older furniture in their home.

The sound of someone knocking on the door startled Harry since it was much too early for anyone to be up. Hedwig gave him an enquiring gaze before she perched on his shoulder. Harry hurriedly

finished reading the correspondence he was holding as he invited the person to enter. His cousin, Dudley, walked into his study with uncertainty written all over his face. His eyes settled on the piles of paperwork sitting on Harry's large desk.

Harry had gaped at the sight of his cousin but he quickly regained his composure and offered him a seat. Dobby immediately set aside the documents he was holding and disappeared to fetch drinks for the guest.

"You're a very powerful and important person in this world, aren't you?" Dudley questioned as he waved his pudgy hand over the pile of documents to illustrate his point. He could see that they were financial reports of the various companies Harry owned.

Dudley hurriedly withdrew his hand when he saw Hedwig eyeing him fiercely with her large eyes.

Harry considered his statement thoughtfully, unaware the effect his familiar had on his cousin." I wouldn't necessarily go that far." answered Harry as he set the document aside.

"That's strange. Charles says that you're seen almost like a member of the royal family – because of that, no one will touch us even though we're Muggles," spoke Dudley with a hint of uncertainty. Dudley, like his father, had laughed when Charles told them flatly that they had no place in magical society and that the wizards generally saw themselves far superior to those who do not possess the gift of magic. The idea was preposterous to the Dursleys since they've always seen magical beings as 'freaks', but Dudley was forced to accept it when he had noticed the strange looks other wizards were giving them when they went with Harry to Diagon Alley.

The trip to Diagon Alley was a bizarre experience for the Dursleys. Dudley had noticed the awe written on the faces of the people they came upon when they saw Harry and his family. They had positively worshipped Harry. Dudley also heard some wizards whisper "The Boy-Who-Lived" with total reverence when they had spotted his cousin. As usual, they turn to Charles for an explanation. They were shocked when Charles recounted the war that gave Harry his

reputation and the loss of most of his family. There was a hint of tears in Charles' large eyes as he shared the sad tale.

There was a flash of regret in his mother's eyes when the elderly elf finished the tale. Dudley couldn't help but pity his cousin since he had to live with the price they paid for his freedom.

"There are four main families who dominate Society. My family is one of them." Harry clarified as he relaxed into his seat and stretched lightly. He thanked Dobby nicely when he gave him a fresh goblet of pumpkin juice.

"If you are so powerful, why don't you command those under you or bully them to do your bidding?" Dudley asked with genuine interest. His tone wrung a cocked brow from Harry.

Harry searched his cousin's face and was convinced that he was really puzzled. He recalled the way Dudley was brought up - his relatives had spoilt him rotten and encouraged him to throw his weight around, so it was no wonder why he felt that way.

"That's simple – there's not really a need to."

Dudley frowned as if his answer was too complex for him to comprehend.

Harry gave him patient smile, "I'm sure you've seen the difference of bullying others into obeying you and people choosing to obey you out of respect."

"Yes," answered Dudley as he grew contemplative for a moment. He noticed the fierce loyalty Harry's staff had for him and their eagerness to please him. "You've always been different." He added in a vague manner as he frowned slightly.

"Do you mean in a freaky way?" asked Harry humorously as he raised one of his eyebrows.

"There's not what I meant. I'm the freak here." Dudley pointed out. "I think you're different in a good way," answered Dudley as he

scratched his head in embarrassment. There was an uncomfortable silence as Harry registered his words.

Did his cousin just compliment him?

"Um...We'll see you then. Dad asked me to tell you that we're leaving soon."

Harry regained his wits almost immediately. With a smile, he stood up. "Let me see you to the door," replied Harry as he stood up and followed his large cousin out.

His aunt and uncle were waiting at the foot of the regal staircase for Dudley. Charles stood beside them as he too waited for the arrival of his master. Harry noted with a smile that Uncle Vernon looked anxious to leave the place and return to his own world where he called the shots - he had apparently enough of taking orders from a being that was much smaller than him.

Harry was surprised to see that his aunt was being unusually quiet. She even looked slightly upset that she was leaving.

"I guess I'll see you all next summer at your place for a week or two," said Harry as he stood near Charles.

Uncle Vernon gave a gruffly affirmative answer, earning a glare from the elder house elf. He immediately clamped his mouth shut and averted his glance.

Harry took a lot of effort to keep his face straight.

"So until next summer, then." Harry concluded curtly.

For once, his relatives bade him goodbye without a hint of resentment. As the house elves took their arms and prepared to apparate, he was taken aback when he saw Aunt Petunia lingering around. She turned around to face him and said, "Thank you for everything."

With that, she disappeared, leaving Harry reeling from her statement.

"My Lord, it's time for breakfast," Charles spoke. "Mrs. Dursley seemed to gain a lot from this visit."

"That was the plan, wasn't it, Charles? Thank you for entertaining them. I know you despised their presence. It's hard to tell because you did everything while being mindful of their well-being." Harry answered with a smile.

"It's the duty of a good servant to carry out the wishes of the Master regardless of their own dislike, my Lord," answered Charles as he bowed.

(End of flashback)

"So today is your first year anniversary?" exclaimed Susan excitedly.

Harry and Hermione nodded at the same time. Susan and Luna hugged them enthusiastically as they congratulated them. The rest of their family and friends also passed on their good wishes to them. The celebratory dinner was still on for the rest of the group, but the couple was excused.

The afternoon was dedicated to more intensive lessons. After finding out that Harry and Hermione had done so well on their national level examinations, the rest of the teenagers were more inspired to catch up to them.

After more than half a year of self-defence lessons, they were finally showing the fruits of their hard work - their punches and kicks packed more power with help from their extensive strength and cardio training. Harry and Hermione noted with pride that their friends would now be able to defend themselves if they needed to do so. After an extensive discussion, Harry and Hermione decided to split the class according to their gender since they were going to need specialised training that catered to their physique. Harry would be solely in-charge of the guys' physical training since they shared almost the same build while Hermione would take care of the girls. They decided that they would have shared practices weekly so that they could test the effectiveness of the new training regime.

The teenagers retreated to the ancient library of the Potter Mansion for their theory lessons on Defence against Dark Arts after lunch. Harry, Hermione, and Cedric were given permission to do their own spell research while the others would have to learn a fixed set of basic counter-hexes and hexes. Harry and Hermione decided to keep themselves on their toes by duelling with each other with wands. It was slightly different from the occasional spar Harry and Hermione had at the house because they were unable to use their own wands. The duel lasted for quite a long time since they were now familiar with each other's duelling style and neither of them held back. Lupin watched in the awe the amount of raw power the young couple had, their nimbleness, and their physical stamina. Neither of the two looked as if they were tired even though they had been running and jumping out of harm's way for at least an hour. The duel was called a draw when the lesson ended but Harry and Hermione enjoyed the session very much.

The young couple headed upstairs to shower. As promised, Oswald took the rest of the group out for dinner, leaving only Harry and Hermione at home.

Their bedroom was empty when Hermione came out of the bathroom.

She smiled when she noticed a bright red note on her nightstand with the words "Read me" written in large letters. Intrigued, she picked up the note and read it.

Angel,

Happy First Anniversary! To make things more exciting, let's play a game. Please follow all instructions carefully. There should now be a bright blue envelope beside you and enclosed within is be a clue that will lead you to your next destination. Once you reach your destination, you will need to speak to the person waiting for you.

Can't wait to see you.

Love,

Harry

Hermione shook her head in amusement as she found and opened the blue envelope. To her surprise, it was a photograph of them taking a stroll along the river at night. Their hands were entwined closely and there was a smile of amusement on her lips as she looked at Harry, as though she had just laughed at one of his jokes. He was neatly dressed in a white tuxedo that she had selected for him but she could see that the focus of the photograph was on her and she looked wonderful - her usually bushy hair was swept into a stylish knot and the gown gave her an air of elegance. She could identify the photograph immediately: it was from their first Valentine's Day together and they had celebrated it in the House. Without further ado, she headed into the House.

When she had materialised, Hermione was surprised to see Ade waiting for her in her physical form. There was a hint of a smile on her ethereal face as she spoke. "Good evening, Hermione. Harry told me to expect you. He would like you to head to your bedroom and there you'll find a special outfit he has chosen just for you. You must put on the dress he has given you before reading the next clue."

Hermione thanked her politely before she apparated to the bedroom they shared whenever they stayed in the House. It had been a while since they'd visited the House – as they had already gotten quite a bit of training, they'd opted, for the present, to keep their time in the House short.

A beautiful summer dress lay on the bed, waiting for her. There were matching white sandals for her to wear and another blue envelope beside the dress. Hermione smiled at his thoughtfulness as she changed into the summer dress. The next envelope contained a picture of them sharing a kiss under the large tree. Hermione frowned as she scrutinised the picture carefully. She had no problem identifying the place since she had spent countless days under the large tree reading but she had trouble pinpointing when this photograph was taken. Both of them were dressed in their house clothes but it was Harry's slightly tatty and overly large clothing that gave it away - this was a photograph of them sharing a kiss for the first time.

Why didn't he use the wedding portrait as a clue? It's the same place. Hermione thought wryly as she read the note. She laughed when she saw his first sentence; it was as if he had expected her reaction.

Hi beautiful,

I know I could have given you a copy of our wedding portrait but it would've made it too simple for you. I'm sure you had to spend some time thinking about when this photograph was taken, right? I'm positive that you look ravishing in that dress. Look out for a blue box.

Love,

Harry

The sky was a flaming red and the outline of the setting sun blurred as the bright yellow blended with the crimson. The entire garden was bathed with a tangerine glow as the sun sank into a bank of clouds. The heat of the day gradually dissipated as darkness began to descend.

Harry was nervously scanning the garden, making sure that everything was in the right place. He had spent last few months working on Hermione's anniversary present whenever he was free. Sirius had lent a hand in the project too. Hedwig alerted him that Hermione had just left the House so he went to reheat the food he had prepared earlier.

Hermione could recognise the tune of the soft music playing in the background as she entered the garden - it was the tune they had first danced to that night they married. The sky was now completely dark and she gasped when she took in the sight of the garden. Someone had reused the Christmas lights to light up the large tree in the middle of the garden. There was a small table under the tree but there was no one in the garden.

"Look out for a blue box," she mused as she searched around the garden. Hermione approached the table and saw a large blue box sitting on top of the table.

"Open me." The note on the box read.

She shot a furtive glance around the quiet garden, certain that someone was watching her as she opened the box but she did as she was told. She gingerly removed the wrapping and cautiously lifted a leather-bound book from within. It was very thick and different from the books that she normally read. Her brows furrowed when she saw the title printed on the cover of the book in large golden letters: "H. J. Potter – The Beginning" Fascinated, she carefully flipped to the first page. She could identify her husband's handwriting immediately and she was shocked that he had written the whole book.

Intrigued, she started on the first chapter. The book was illustrated from his point of view and it began from the first day they had met. The first chapter was about the two years they had spent together as friends, highlighting the important moments during those years like their first Halloween and the times she stood by him during their second year when all his friends shunned him. She casually flipped through the book and realised that he had thoughtfully included some memorable photographs of the times they had spent together and of things that were significant.

Hermione gently fingered the crumpled piece of paper on the page she was reading.

Of the many fearsome beasts and monsters that roam our land, there is none more curious or more deadly than the Basilisk, known also as the King of Serpents. This snake, which may reach a gigantic size, and live many hundreds of years, is born from a chicken's egg, hatched beneath a toad. Its methods of killing is most wondrous, for aside from its deadly and venomous fangs, the Basilisk has a murderous stare, and all who are fixed with the beam of its eye shall suffer instant death. Spiders flee before the Basilisk, for it is their mortal enemy, and the Basilisk flees only from the crowing of the rooster, which is fatal to it.

Pipes

She remembered this piece of paper quite well - she had torn it from a page of an old library book and recognised her own hand in which

the word "Pipes" was hurriedly written. She'd been in the library, following her hunch about the creature hiding in the Chamber of Secrets, when she heard the hissing sound. She only had enough time to scribble her thought on the way the large serpent was travelling and hoped that Harry would understand what she meant when he read it. Due to the amazing connection they shared, he did.

What she did not know was that he had stowed it away in his pocket, as if it were a good-luck charm, when he faced the Basilisk. She made a mental note to ask him about viewing that particular memory of his.

She carefully closed the book as glistening tears welled up in her eyes. She was touched by the enormous effort Harry put in to make this gift. It was so wonderfully done. She felt someone wrapping his arms around her as he whispered into her ear, "Happy Anniversary, Angel. I really hope those are tears of joy."

Hermione turned around and flung her arms around him.

Harry was beaming from ear to ear as he looked at her. He wordlessly wiped the tear off her cheeks with the pad of his thumb as his smile grew tender.

"I guess you really liked the gift," remarked Harry as he scratched his head. "I know that I'm not the best writer, but I tried my best. It's a bit difficult doing justice to the moments that we've experienced together both as friends then as a couple."

"It's wonderful, Harry! I absolutely love it," answered Hermione as she hugged the book close to her.

"I'm glad. You look beautiful in the dress, by the way. Just like I thought you would," commented Harry as he pressed his lips on the back of her hand lovingly.

"Thank you." Hermione said as a soft smile fitted her lips. Dressed in a casual shirt and long trousers, with his hair was untameable despite his best efforts to smooth it, she found him breathtaking. "You look pretty wonderful yourself."

"I dress to please." Harry returned as he shot a cheekily smile in her direction. "But I thank you all the same, milady." Harry went on as he bowed exaggeratedly.

Hermione gently swatted him on the arm for his playful demeanour but it was clear from the twinkling of her eyes that she wasn't at all angry with him.

He led her to the small table lit by candles and seated her. It was then that she discovered the tray of food hovering behind him. It was an innovative use of the levitating charm to keep the tray afloat so that her could be free his arms to hug her. Harry set aside the large blue box and placed the dishes on the table. He had prepared steak for the night and it looked mouth-watering.

"The food looks delicious," commented Hermione as Harry sat opposite to her. "I had the impression we'd be eating out tonight given that we celebrated our wedding at a restaurant. I'm surprised that you chose to celebrate with a meal here in the garden."

Harry cocked a brow as he gazed enquiringly at her.

"I thought you'd go overboard with an expensive dinner," Hermione explained with a smile.

"The thought did cross my mind but it was much too difficult to organise if I wanted to have the little game. Besides, I'm sure you probably guessed where dinner would be by the second envelope." Harry admitted.

She laughed vibrantly at his faith in her intelligence.

"You're predictable, love - the same way I am to you," replied Hermione with a teasing smile.

His eyes danced with amusement as he laughed brightly. "So did it take a while for you to remember when that kiss took place?" He asked with interest.

"I did but your clothes gave it away. We shared our first kiss before we took you on your first shopping trip." Hermione explained as she took a bite of the steak. It was prepared just the way she liked it and she nearly swooned when she tasted the juice oozing out of the meat after her bite. "It's really good, Harry," she said suddenly.

"Thank you," Harry smiled as he watched her closely.

They chatted at length about how Harry prepared for the surprise. She was certain that Sirius had a hand in it and found that she was right when Harry told her that Sirius helped to send the book for binding and decorating the garden.

"How did you guess?" Harry asked in puzzlement as he looked at Hermione.

"When Sirius announced in the morning that you had plans for the night, I was sure that you'd roped him in," replied Hermione.

Harry shook his head as he laughed.

"Couldn't you have pretended that you didn't know?" Harry asked jokingly.

"Well, didn't you want me to guess it?" Hermione retorted.

Harry froze as he considered her words thoughtfully. "Well, I guess so, in a way. I guess it's an achievement to surprise you even though you kind of knew about the surprise." Harry answered.

The conversation between them was light and relaxing as they continued to tease each other. Harry enjoyed the quiet time they had with each other. Hermione expressed her gratitude for the wonderful meal when she finally finished.

"Happy First Anniversary, Harry," greeted Hermione as she presented him with the scrapbook that she had painstakingly put together. "I must admit that the effort I've put into this gift pales in comparison to yours," Hermione said as she watched him expectantly.

Harry was in admiration of the effort she had placed for each page of the scrapbook Hermione had meticulously designed. She had carefully picked the photographs and wrote a short poem on every page.

Tears began to well up in his eyes as he carefully flipped through every page. He saw the evidence of her hard work and the words of every poem she had penned down neatly on the pages tugged at his heartstrings. They were honest, loving, and sincere.

"Thanks, Mione. It's really wonderful," whispered Harry emotionally as he gazed into her eyes. He carefully set the gift aside and they shared a tender kiss. Hermione jumped away in surprise when she heard a vehicle pulling up in front of her family home. Her parents had told them before they left for work that they would be staying out late.

"Our ride is here," announced Harry as he took her hand.

Her brows drew into a frown of confusion as she looked at him.

There was a mystifying smile on his lips as he led her to the car waiting for them.

Harry was tight-lipped throughout the whole ride about where he was bringing her to for her second surprise and it shocked her when he actually brought her to a pub in London.

The place was dark and crowded with people but they soon found a place to stand. Hermione was certain that he must have pulled strings so that they could enter because the crowd appeared to be slightly older than them. She spotted many older teenage girls in the crowd.

"Why did you bring me here?" Hermione questioned as she looked at Harry. She never got her answer because the crowd went crazy, drowning out any conversations entirely.

Four teenagers took the stage and they were excitedly waving at their fans as they proceeded to take their places. Hermione gasped when she realised that the lead singer was none other than Ray Vaughan, her childhood friend. He oozed boyish charm as he flashed his

signature smile. There was just something about him that made him look as though he belonged to the stage. He calmly took the mike from the microphone stand and greeted the crowd warmly as his band mates began to tune their instruments.

Ray entertained the crowd after introducing his band mates to the hyped up crowd.

Hermione grew excited. She had always wanted to see her childhood friend on stage and she was simply overjoyed that Harry had remembered.

The band kicked off with a fast beat song that drove the crowd wild and Hermione couldn't help but be amazed by his skills on the guitar. The song was masterfully played and there was good rapport between all the members of the band.

Hermione beamed when she saw that smile of fulfilment on Ray's face as he sang and played the guitar at the same time. His voice was melodious and the songs that they had played that night highlighted the versatility of his voice. The band boldly explored various genres of music as they played different songs, altering the mood of the crowds with their amazing self-composed music. They were all very talented and she could see from the way that they thrown themselves into their performance, how passionate they were about their music. Ray was all pumped up from the excitement and she could see that he was enjoying every single moment from the twinkling of his grey eyes. The crowd danced enthusiastically to the music when the band chose to play a fast number. Hermione and Harry enjoyed themselves immensely as they listened to all their songs. Occasionally, Harry and Hermione would join the crowd and danced to their music.

All too soon, their gig came to an end and they were playing their final song for the encore. His band mates took the cue from him when he nodded and they exited the stage.

He casually flicked his wet brown hair aside as he set his electrical guitar aside.

"Well for encore, I'll like to do something a bit special." Ray announced with a dazzling smile as he picked up his trusty acoustic guitar and sat on the high stool. He began testing the sound of the guitar by playing a few notes as he spoke into the mike. "My friend and I used to spend countless afternoons lying under a tree as I practiced playing my guitar and my singing. I think the word 'friend' can't express the closeness we shared. We were much closer than that and I see her as a sister of some sort and she's here tonight. I would like to dedicate our all time favourite song to you and I want to tell you that I'll always love you..." He said with a hooded look.

There were several gaps from the crowd.

That incited a chuckle from him and he hurriedly injected, "As an older brother, of course. Herm, I hope that the lucky boy you've chosen to be with will always hold you close and never let you go. If you know the song, sing along with me. Give it up for More Than Words by Extreme. Enjoy everyone." Ray concluded as he began strumming his guitar skilfully.

Hermione shook her head in amusement when she heard him emphasise "Herm". She didn't miss the sparkling of his grey eyes when he had said it. His voice became more solemn when he wished her well. Hermione felt Harry slipping both of his arms around her as their hands entwined together. They swayed to the music as Hermione laid her head in the crook of his shoulder and sang along.

Saying that I love you is not the words I want to hear from you.

It's not that I want you not to say, but if you only knew how easy it would be to show me how you feel.

More than words is all you have to do to make it real.

Then you wouldn't have to say that you love me, 'cause I'd already know.

She remembered the countless afternoons they would lie under the huge tree in her garden as he practiced on his guitar and she would be engrossed with another novel. Ray had dreamt of being a lead

guitarist ever since his parents gave him his first acoustic guitar. Whenever Ray felt that she was ignoring him long enough, he would play and sing this song, knowing that she liked it and Hermione would sing along with him.

There was an amused smile on her face when Harry humorously twirled her before pulling her close to him. Her hands were on his chest while his were around her as they swayed slowly to the music. When she tilted her head slightly so that she could get a good look of his face, she noticed that his eyes were closed. She laid her head on his chest as she enjoyed the security of being in his arms.

The song had another meaning for her now. Hermione could count the number of times Harry had actually told her in words that he loved her with one hand but she knew that he loved her with his all his heart because he always tried to put her first in everything that he did. She hoped that their love would continue to be real.

Hermione didn't stop smiling for the next few days much to the amusement of her friends. They tried to pester her for the details of their private celebration but Hermione remained tight-lipped about it. They did discover the present that Harry made for Hermione and swooned.

"I must say that he knows how to get your attention," commented Daphne as she smiled. "I can't think of anything better to give you."

"That was really thoughtful of him." Susan said as she beamed.

"Perhaps it can be bested by charms to scare those Dipuces away. Well, they tend to make you fall in love with others."

Susan and Daphne exchanged looks.

"Perhaps," Hermione replied with a dazzling smile.

"Do you think you could cast one on me? I haven't had any luck in relationships," added Susan as she sighed. Daphne rolled her eyes.

"I thought it was pretty obvious who you'll be with," Luna announced absent-mindedly.

That caught their attention.

"Who?" Susan inquired, knowing that she would regret asking.

"Ernie Macmilian," answered Luna as she kept a straight face.

The expression on Susan's face was priceless and her friends unable to prank her any longer, burst out laughing.

"Thank Merlin, it was just a joke," commented Susan as she let out a sigh of relief.

"You couldn't be sure, look what happened after she said I had feelings for Cedric?" Daphne prompted and the Hufflepuff looked queasy at the thought.

Three days after the anniversary, they celebrated Harry's fourteenth birthday by throwing a small party at his house. It was a shock for Harry to discover a roomful of people greeting him when he entered the dining room for lunch. Among the familiar faces of his friends and family, he saw the Gryffindor Quidditch team and Hagrid. The Weasley twins had invited the entire team, per Hermione's instructions, to the party.

It was like a dream come true for Harry.

"Wow, it sure reminds me of birthdays at the Dursleys," Harry commented with a smile as he looked at the pile of presents at the side of the room. Naturally, it wasn't his own birthday that he was referring to. He was referring to Dudley's birthdays. The Dursleys always made it a point to go all out whenever they celebrated their son's birthday. The floor of the kitchen was usually filled with so many presents that it was impossible to walk through on those days. Seeing the look on their faces, he quickly added, "I mean this is fantastic."

"I think you'll probably need to make an appointment with my parents after you're through with all the presents that the Gryffindor team has for you," remarked Hermione when Harry slipped his arm around her.

He cocked his brow in amusement as he looked at his wife. "We shall see if you're correct, sweetheart."

The house elves pulled no stops in preparing the food for the occasion despite Hermione reminding them that it would be a small party for family and friends. The feast was grand enough to shame the house elves back at Hogwarts and large enough to feed all of them for several days.

"The house elves did not know what to get for you, my Lord, so they decided to present you with this cake," said Charles as he clapped his hands. Immediately, several house elves carried a large cake into the dining room. Harry nearly gaped when he saw the size and the decorations on the cake. The icing decorations reflected the guests of this party and the figurines were made in likeness of every single one of them. The occupants in the room immediately burst into the birthday song as the house elves carried the cake to the middle of the room.

When the song finally ended and Harry had made his wishes, fireworks were released suddenly and they formed the words, "Happy Birthday, Harrikins" before the words transformed into a boy speeding on a broomstick. The boy on the speeding broomstick was made in likeness of Harry and unlike the other fireworks; it did not fade and continue to zoom around the room, performing marvellous tricks on the broom. It was a spectacular display of magic and the room burst into applause at the sight of the fireworks.

"I hope you liked our gift to you, Harry," said Fred as he smiled.

"It's awesome. You're going to put Dr Filibusters out of business!" Harry praised with a smile.

The house elves took over the cutting of cake and Harry instructed them to cut a slice for all that was in the house, including the house

elves. They nodded since they were used to the way their new Lord treated everyone like an equal.

The guest received a slice of cake with their figurine on it. Harry marvelled at the likeness of the figurine standing on his slice of cake and told Charles to thank everyone for all their hard work. It was a lively affair as they caught up with one another.

"Presents time!" Sirius announced once they had finished their cake.

The Grangers were the first to go since they were giving him the largest present. There was no way in masking the present because the size and the shape would give it away. Dan and Jean presented him his first bicycle, knowing that the Dursleys never taught him how to ride.

"Happy birthday, Harry. I know you've never ridden on a bicycle before so we're giving you your very own bicycle and lessons on how to master it," Dan declared as he rested a hand on his shoulders.

There were tears in his eyes as he carefully fingered his shiny new bicycle. It was clear from their present that they wanted to fill up the void in his life as his parents. They were going to make sure that he didn't miss out on anything in his childhood. Touched, he gave them a hug each as he expressed his delight at the gift.

Sirius and the other adults smiled at this warm exchange.

Cedric, Daphne, and Astoria presented him with a dragon-hide bag that matched Hermione's. The only difference was that it was a shade darker than hers. "The girls wanted to get you something outrageous and I stopped them in time," explained Cedric. He laughed when Daphne elbowed him.

"He's such a party pooper," groused Astoria as she glared at her sister's boyfriend. Cedric merely smiled.

"Thank Merlin that he could intervene in time lest I get another embarrassing present," Harry answered as he made a face. "This is something I need. Thank you."

Susan, Luna, and Neville gave him a stamp for his birthday. It looked exactly like those in which office workers would use to stamp the date or their name on documents. He was surprised to see that it was blank and Susan proceeded to explain.

"We saw this stamp at a non-magical shop and decided to modify it ourselves. It's different from the non-magical. You need to put your signature on the box provided on the top of the stamp, so that it can be absorbed by the stamp. It will magically adjust to fit the space you need to put your signature on, saving the effort of signing the mountains of documents. By the way, we've built in a safeguard – you're the only one who can use the stamp once you've entered your signature. If anyone else tries, they will quickly realise that it won't work." Susan explained.

His smile was large enough to split his face. "It's brilliant. It's going to save me a lot of time signing," said Harry excitedly and he thanked them profusely.

The Gryffindor team came next and most of them gave him sweets for his birthday. Hermione gave him a triumph look when she discovered that she was spot on. Crookshanks nimbly stole a chocolate frog and escaped immediately when Harry unwrapped a box of Chocolate Frogs.

Hermione frowned at the behaviour of her familiar and summoned the Chocolate Frog from him.

Harry swore that he could feel Crookshanks' displeasure and disappointment as he sulked in some corner of the large mansion.

"I'll speak to him later. He knows he can't have chocolate," Hermione promised. The Gryffindor team didn't know if they should laugh or applaud at her mastery of the summoning spell.

The rest of the adults were the last to give Harry his present and they had a good reason to do so. They had given him copies of their memories of his parents. Harry became speechless when he

received a whole box full of vials of memories of his parents. With tears in his eyes, he thanked them.

Harry went up to set his precious presents aside, leaving the guests to talk and mingle.

Most of the teenagers noticed the strange tension between George and Angelina whenever they spoke. Susan and Hermione exchanged knowing looks when the two of them disappeared suddenly after Harry went to put away most of his gifts. They began to discuss the highlights of the Quidditch World Cup enthusiastically. The Gryffindor team was excited when they learnt that Harry had a Quidditch pitch in the Mansion. They grew even more thrilled when they realised that they were playing on good broomsticks and with top of the line equipment. There were good protection gear specially designed for every position on the team and if they were not mistaken, they were the latest and the best the market had to offer. Oswald begged off the game, opting to take note of the modifications he needed to make to the new protective gear one of his companies manufactured so that he could create a new line of Quidditch armour. The teenagers ended up playing a game of Quidditch so the Grangers were treated to a match in which the winning house played.

They had a lot of fun since this was the last time they would be playing together as a team. Oliver Wood had just graduated from Hogwarts.

"I didn't think Hermione would be so good at Quidditch," Oliver commented when he missed the shot that Hermione had thrown into the goal.

"Well, if you hang with people like Cedric, Harry, Fred and George, it's impossible not to learn, especially when they play so much," replied Hermione with a wide smile.

They could hear Harry chuckling hovering above as he searched the grounds carefully. He was playing seeker, against Cedric. Cedric was also flying around trying to find the snitch.

"What a luxury," commented Katie as she hovered near the goal post.

"It's a pity I didn't have the opportunity to groom someone to take my place before I left." Oliver admitted with a hint of regret.

"What do you think of Longbottom?" asked Alicia as she flew up with the Quaffle. "He did manage to save several of Katie's best shots."

His eyes gleamed as he eyed the quiet boy hovering near the three hoops at the far end. "Maybe he'll be a good replacement."

Angeline laughed, "Once a captain, always a captain." She commented with a smile as the game went back into play.

The game lasted all afternoon and finally ended when Harry caught the snitch as usual, much to the chagrin of Cedric. Harry dodged when Cedric playfully tried to knock him off his broom in mid-air even though the game had ended.

"That makes it eight wins for Harry and only two for Cedric," Luna announced dreamily from the stand as she stood between Oswald and the Grangers. When the Grangers looked at her enquiringly, she answered, "Harry and Cedric had played ten matches against each other as seekers. So far, Harry's leading with eight catches. They are both pretty competitive."

Most of the guests had left after a delightful dinner. Harry had sincerely enjoyed himself in the company of his close friends, teammates and family. Their friends decided to dedicate the rest of their evening to reading up on the various spells in preparation of the next day's lessons.

The couple were alone in the room enjoying some quiet time together after such a busy day. Harry was looking through the vials of memories that the adults had carefully listed and dated. He felt Hermione standing next to him.

"Sweetheart, I need you to put those aside and follow me," said Hermione as she gently took his hand.

There was a frown of confusion on his face as he looked at Hermione.

Hermione gave him a patient smile. "I haven't given you your birthday present and it's waiting in the House."

Intrigued, he set the memories carefully aside and followed her into the House.

A/N:I don't own the song More than Words by Extreme but it's one of my favourite.

Hi, everyone. Thank you for your reviews. I was told that traditional gifts couples exchanged between themselves during their first anniversary was paper so all their gifts revolved around it- the scrapbook, book and the tickets to her bestfriend's gig. That's if you're wondering why Harry seemed to only receive such. Looking forward to hearing from you. Have a great week!

Chapter 26

Beta-read by Frustr8dwriter

Harry opened his eyes and gazed at the ceiling in wonder. He couldn't remember how he ended up in his bed. How long had he been asleep? He thought as he stretched his unusually stiff limbs and gave a yawn.

His bed was absent of the warmth of another body and he frowned. Before he could ask her for her whereabouts through their shared awareness, he heard someone briskly walking in. He didn't have to look up to know who it was since he could recognise her footsteps anywhere, but he still did.

Her long wavy hair was tied up neatly into a ponytail and her eyes reflected concern.

She took a seat next to him on their large bed and looked at him intently as if he were a patient who had just awakened from a coma.

"Are you finally awake, Harry? How do you feel?" Hermione asked worriedly.

"How do I feel?" He echoed in puzzlement as he touched the bridge of his nose. His eyes widened when he discovered that he wasn't wearing his glasses.

"My vision's been corrected," spoke Harry in awe.

A smile graced her features. "That's wonderful! The ritual was a success. Do you feel any differently?" Hermione questioned excitedly.

"No, not really other than I feel unusually refreshed," answered Harry as he flashed a hesitant smile.

"Good, I'm glad. Initially, I considered the use of contact lenses but it will get tedious putting them in and taking them off daily. Plus, there's always a possibility that they might fall out if not worn properly. All my research showed that there were no adverse side effects to this ritual,

but I couldn't help but worry since nobody has used it for many years," began Hermione. "The government had placed a ban on rituals some time ago so there wasn't really anyone I could consult besides Elissa and Edmund..."

"Well, it worked and you'd know if I wasn't feeling okay," Harry interrupted in an amused tone.

She stopped as looked at Harry closely.

Her gaze became intense as she scanned his face. Her hands gently framed his face as her eyes locked onto his. "You have the most amazing eyes, sweetheart. You look even more gorgeous without your glasses," commented Hermione huskily.

His smile grew tender and he leaned closer to her. Hermione instinctively closed her eyes and he kissed her nose gently.

"Thank you," answered Harry as he drew away. "I've always liked brown eyes, though. Anyway, I thought you helped me to correct my vision to reduce my disadvantage in battles?"

"That was the primary reason. I didn't think that there'd be additional benefits," replied Hermione, smiling.

"Thank you for your birthday gift. It's very thoughtful and useful," said Harry sincerely as he played with her hands.

"Hedwig had a part in it too, but you're welcome." Hermione returned with a small smile. A thoughtful look appeared on her face as she considered the possibilities, "This ritual is dead useful. We can probably use it in the future since it's safe and painless."

Harry smiled in amusement at the way her eyes seemed to sparkle with excitement. "What happened last night? I only remember that you asked me to enter the House and led me to sit in a diagram you drew on the ground before you drew runes on my face. What after that?"

"Actually, my love, that was two nights ago. You slept through the whole day yesterday. After I completed the ritual, there was a purple glow and you immediately fell into a deep sleep. I had to levitate you to our room." Hermione replied.

"Two nights ago?" He echoed in surprise.

"Yes – since you have Myopia or nearsightedness, a long sleep is required to correct the inadequate correlation between the focusing power of the cornea and the lens, the refractory structures in the eye and the length of the eyeball. In a myopic eye, the parallel light rays that enter the light are refracted too much, for many reasons like the eye is too long, that they converge to form an image in front of the retina instead of on the retina, as such a over focused fuzzy image is send to the brain instead of a crisp and clear one."

Harry was not surprised by her lengthy explanation and the effort she put into her research into his myopia. Harry nodded in understanding since he had learned about light when he was still in Muggle primary school. He briefly recalled the diagram of the cross section of the eye in his head and fitted the pieces together. "So during sleep, the ritual corrects that inadequacy so that the refracted light rays can converge on the retina, sending a clear image to the brain?"

Hermione beamed as she nodded. "Exactly."

"Wow, that's quite a lot to absorb so early in the morning, Mione. The long sleep explains why I'm feeling so rested though. How much time do we have left in the House?" He asked as he got on his feet and went into the bathroom.

"I think still we have several hours. Was there something you needed to do?"

His eyes twinkled with excitement. "What do you think about warming up with a simulated battle?" asked Harry as he poked his head out of the bathroom.

She could read the exhilaration in his face – he was simply dying to try battling without the disadvantage of having to wear his glasses.

"I'll meet you in the gym," returned Hermione and she disappeared with a loud 'crack'.

Everyone was surprised when Harry joined them for their daily run without his glasses. Hermione explained that they had corrected his nearsightedness using an ancient ritual she found in one of the old tomes in the Potter library.

Amelia frowned at her words. "You do know that rituals are prohibited for a good reason, don't you?" asked Amelia. It was obvious that she disapproved of Hermione's actions.

"Yes, I do. However, this ritual wasn't dark or dangerous. To the best of my knowledge, it was a commonly used ritual until the government passed a law to ban all rituals regardless of its nature," defended Hermione.

Sirius and Harry immediately stepped in to reducing the rising tensions between the two headstrong females. "I know you care for Harry, Am, but Hermione would never try anything on Harry unless she was fully certain that it won't harm him. You fret too much, my dear," interjected Sirius gently as he placed a comforting hand on her arm.

"I'm really feeling fine, Aunt Am," assured Harry with a smile as he wrapped an arm around his wife. "Wearing glasses has always been a hindrance; it was a good idea that Hermione was able to fix my vision."

It was clear to everyone that Hermione would never compromise Harry's health and Amelia was being overly concerned.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I can't help being a worry wart with so much happening around us." Amelia admitted. "And just because I was apprehensive, doesn't mean that I don't have faith in your abilities, Hermione. What you did was pretty amazing."

Hermione couldn't be upset with Aunt Am since she was clearly acting out of concern for Harry. She instead expressed her gratitude

at Amelia's compliment. Things went back to normal as they went on their usual morning jog around the estate.

After breakfast, the teenagers returned to their respective homes to spend some time with their families for the weekend. There was a heated debate over breakfast when Harry made the suggestion. They all reasoned that Tom Riddle was still a large threat to all of them and they didn't have enough time for all the training they needed even if they worked on it every waking moment during the summer break. Yet, Harry and Hermione refused to back down.

"I appreciate your dedication to this cause. I know you'd all do anything to keep me safe and I'm very grateful to have friends like you," began Harry as he searched their faces. His friends were silenced immediately since it wasn't often that Harry would be this vocal about his feelings. "Think about it - how much time will you get to spend with your families once school starts? I'd say not much at all so it'd be cruel of me to keep you from your family. Besides, you all need a break occasionally because overworking before you even begin school is not healthy."

His friends considered his words gravely and reluctantly gave in. They agreed to return home to their families every weekend until the end of summer holidays. They had only a month of their summer holidays left. Jean seized the opportunity to spend some quality time with her only daughter by taking her out after breakfast, leaving Dan and Harry together.

It worked out well for Dan since he wanted to use the free time to teach Harry how to ride his bicycle. As soon as everyone left, Harry and Dan wheeled the bike carefully out to the gardens of the Potter Mansion. The garden was a sight to behold with its myriad of distinct colours as flowers were in full bloom.

Harry eyed the bicycle warily as Dan held it steady. He had always wanted to learn to ride a bicycle but he wasn't sure if he could do it.

"Don't worry, Harry. I know you can do this. Besides, I won't let you fall," promised Dan as he smiled.

Seeing the sincerity in his father-in-law's eyes and feeling a sense of security that his heartfelt promise gave him, Harry climbed confidently onto his bicycle. His brows drew into a line as he tried pedalling his bicycle for the first time. He did as Dan had instructed, but he realised that it wasn't as easy as he thought it would be. He remembered the times when he observed people speeding cheerily down the street on their bicycles with such ease. However, now that he was trying it himself, he discovered how difficult it was to maintain balance while pedalling.

"You're doing fine, Harry," encouraged Dan as Harry began making some progress.

Harry was grateful for the even path surrounding the grounds because it made learning easier.

Harry lost balance frequently and whenever Harry thought that he was going to crash onto the ground, Dan would steady the bicycle, preventing him from falling.

"Try again, Harry. You're doing quite well." Dan encouraged. Harry's face brightened up, noticing the beads of perspiration on Dan's forehead from supporting his weight. Dan never complained, though. He frowned in determination as he tried again. They practiced through the afternoon, stopping only for a quick lunch under the trees.

The house elves brought food for them as they sat in the shade. It offered a good view of the well-maintained gardens. The serenity of the place was something that both of them enjoyed.

"Here, take these, Dad." Harry said as he handed him a towel and a drink.

Dan's quiet strength and boundless patience was one of the reasons Harry looked up to him. There was just something about the man that made him feel protected whenever he was with him. He knew that Dan was someone he could talk to without feeling embarrassed and that Dan would do anything to keep him safe. Was this what having a father felt like?

"I'm really starting to feel my age," commented Dan with a smile as he drank from the cup Harry had given to him. "The heat doesn't help, either." He wiped the perspiration off his brow with the towel.

"Yet, you're still able to support my weight," added Harry with a smile. "I really appreciate you taking the time to teach me. I'll try my best not to lose my balance later."

Dan chuckled affectionately as he tousled his hair. "It's natural that to lose your balance when you're learning how to ride a bicycle. I think you'll get a hang of it soon. Let's continue practising after lunch."

He nodded as he continued eating.

Dan smiled at how comfortable Harry was being with him. It was the first time they had done something together, just the two of them. They chatted lightly about sports as they finished up their lunch and continued with their practice.

By the end of the afternoon, Dan was sure of Harry's abilities to ride the bike without any support. When Harry got a hang of pedalling and started travelling across the garden, Dan let go and watched him cycle along the garden path.

Harry, oblivious that he had been set free, had a large grin on his face as he rode across the garden.

"Dad! I think I've got it!" Harry shouted as he turned back, expecting to see him standing behind him with an encouraging smile on his face. He was shell-shocked when he realised that Dan was standing a distance away from him. Suddenly, he began to lose control of his bicycle. The bicycle began to wobble wildly as he tried to maintain his balance.

"Harry!" Dan shouted as he ran towards him, ready to lend him assistance.

"Don't worry, I got this!" He shouted in return as he struggled to keep upright.

For a short moment, Dan froze as he watched Harry struggled. The paternal instinct in him drove him to protect Harry with his all but he realised that there were just this much he could protect Harry and Hermione from. Even though they had been diligent in keeping things a secret, Dan couldn't help putting the pieces together and concluding that they were facing a threat that would continue disrupt their lives until it was removed.

With much effort, Harry finally gained control of his bicycle. "I did it, Dad!" he shouted with glee as he cycled around Dan to show that he could now ride without assistance.

Dan heaved a sigh of relief before he smiled indulgently.

Harry decided to test his limits and began speeding up. He followed the path and began riding further and further away from him until he completely disappeared from his sight when he cycled past the bend.

Dan began to worry since he couldn't see Harry and considered following after Harry, fearing that he might crash because he was still so new at it. Dan frowned for a moment. He stopped and placed his hands into his pockets and waited.

It was time he learnt to let go. It was difficult for Dan to admit that the children no longer needed him to prevent her from falling but it was time to put his trust in their abilities and have the faith that they will come back victorious.

He spotted Harry cycling towards him. There was a huge grin his face when he applied the brakes and stopped right beside him.

"That was so much fun! Did you see, Dad? I can ride a bicycle!" Harry said excitedly as he leapt off his bicycle.

"Well done, son. It was really brilliant. I knew you could do it."

Dan didn't think Harry's smile could grow any wider than the one he had on his face but he was surprised when it did. His son-in-law's eyes sparkled with sheer joy at his praise and his faith in him.

"Thanks Dad!" Harry answered excitedly as he wheeled his bicycle and walked beside him. "I think Mione and Mummy are back from their outing. Are you hungry?"

"Of course, I'm completely famished. Let's see what the house elves have prepared for this evening."

"Uh, Dad? They're not at the Mansion, they're over at your place," answered Harry when Hermione told him to go to the Granger's house.

Dan's eyebrows shot into his hairline and commented, "I guess they're in the mood to cook."

"I agree. Anyway, you should try some of Hermione's cooking. She's improved by leaps and bounds. You'll like it," Harry said.

"When did she have to opportunity to practice her cooking skills? She told me that the house elves at the school take care of all the cooking and cleaning."

"We have our own kitchen in our school quarters. Besides, you know that once Hermione sets her mind to do something and excel in it, nothing short of a worldwide annihilation can stop her from practising until she got a hang of it," explained Harry with a smile.

Dan laughed but he had to admit that it was true. For a moment, he pitied Harry for being Hermione's guinea pig.

Harry and Dan washed up at the Potter Mansion before joining their wives.

The large dining table groaned under the weight of the many scrumptious dishes that Jean and Hermione had painstakingly prepared. Hermione, wearing an apron, held another dish as she entered the dining room.

"Let me help you, sweetheart," said Harry as he took the dish out her hands and placed it carefully on the table. Hermione briefly kissed him on the cheek in gratitude.

Harry walked briskly into the kitchen and checked with his mother-in-law if she needed any help. She had everything under control so she shooed him out to the dining room to wait with Dan at the table.

"You've outdone yourselves today," commented Dan when Jean and Hermione joined them in the dining room.

There were smiles on their faces when Harry complimented them as well.

"Hermione and I decided that since we haven't made dinner in a while, we'd cook today. Those dishes on that side of the table were prepared and cooked by Hermione while the rest was made by me," explained Jean. "It seems that our daughter has finally learned to cook."

"Harry told me you've been practising. Let me see if it tastes as good as it looks," remarked Dan as he tried one of the dishes. To his surprise, it was really tasty.

They laughed at the shocked expression on Dan's face as they all dug in. Harry and Dan made sure that they praised the ladies as often as they could, making them flustered. The conversation soon drifted to the happenings of the day.

Harry dominated the first part of the conversation, excitedly sharing with them how he learned to ride his bike. It was clear from the animated way he was speaking and his gleaming eyes that he was very happy.

"That was really fast," commented Hermione with a smile. "And there's not a scratch on you, either."

"Dad was always there to catch me whenever I lost my balance," answered Harry as he looked at his father-in-law with admiration. Dan sheepishly drew his hand through his hair.

"He has an amazing sense of balance, so I didn't have to do much work." Dan interjected as he smiled. It was clear to the two ladies that the afternoon did brought their two men closer.

Hermione's own experience at learning how to ride a bicycle reflected Dan's protective nature since he never let Hermione fall at all. Hermione took a longer time to master the use of the bicycle. The Grangers also shared about their own experiences, but Dan wasn't as blessed as the rest of them. His father's method of teaching was to give him a bicycle that was at least twice his size and left him to the hands of fate. As a result, Dan had fallen many times, sometimes quite badly, until he learned how to ride.

Hermione talked about, with equal pleasure, her outing with her mother. They decided to indulge themselves with a session of facials, manicures, and pedicures. It was a novel experience for Hermione but she enjoyed herself immensely – she just sat back and allowed others to their work on her. Hermione felt very relaxed after all the pampering. It was clear that Hermione enjoyed spending some time alone with her mother. Hermione excitedly displayed her newly painted and manicured nails and Harry complemented the colour she had selected.

Harry and Dan insisted on cleaning up to express their gratitude for the excellent meal, chasing the ladies to the living room for a respite as they cleared up the dining room and kitchen. Jean and Hermione knew that it was fruitless to argue after seeing the resolve in their eyes. Jean personally did not trust her husband to do the cleaning but she relented when Harry assured her.

Harry realised why Jean had a worried look on her face when Dan suggested cleaning up because it was clear to him that Dan was completely out of his depth in the kitchen. Hermione had to get that trait from someone, he mused.

"Are you sure you don't want me to help you?" questioned Dan.

"I'll be fine. I like cleaning up the kitchen by myself. It's a bad habit of mine, Hermione can testify to that." Harry added with a grin.

Dan cast a wary look at his son-in-law, certain that he was telling a fib. He suspected that he was banished because of his inadequacy and Harry was just too polite to say so. Truth to be told, he himself had a feeling that he was making more of a mess out of everything instead of helping to clean up.

"Don't worry, Dad. I can handle this on my own." Harry assured as he started washing the dishes.

Dan, seeing that Harry had everything in control, left the kitchen to join his wife and daughter in the living room for a chat. The television was turned on and his "girls" were watching a documentary. He joined his wife on the couch. A little while later, Harry entered the living room and joined Hermione on the floor. Hermione instinctively snuggled up to him as they watched television.

The Grangers and the Potters spend the rest of their evening quietly. The Potters ended up staying over because Hermione dozed off while they were still watching television. Harry gently carried her up to her old room and they spent the night there.

The Grangers surprised them the next morning by taking them out to the beach. Hedwig was quite upset that she had to stay at home because she would look too out of place at the beach while Crookshanks got to come along.

Crookshanks appeared to be more docile than usual ever since Hermione punished him for the chocolate fiasco by refusing to feed him for a day. As a result, he had to hunt for most of his food, something Crookshanks rarely did unless he was given no choice. He seemed to be repentant and Hermione ended his punishment early.

It was amusing to watch Crookshanks sticking his head out the window of the car throughout the journey to the beach as his tail flicked and swished like a ginger-coloured pendulum. It wasn't difficult to understand his fascination with the sights outside the car as the Grangers drove.

The long stretch of sandy shore with an adjacent grassy green was dotted with brightly coloured camping tents and umbrella from a far.

Harry and Hermione could sense Crookshanks' thrill when the Grangers finally stopped the car and began to unpack. He leapt out of the car with a grace that was unusual for his size.

"Be patient, Crookshanks," Harry admonished as he carried the large bag.

The sea breeze was warm and it smelled of salt. The clamour of sounds assaulted his senses. He could hear the screams and giggles of boisterous young children playing on the beach. It seemed that it was a popular idea to spend a summer afternoon on the beach that day.

Crookshanks set off to explore the beach alone as they searched for a quiet place to set up their things. They walked past a group of young people entertaining themselves with a game of beach volleyball on a makeshift court. They shot and dived with great style, but to Harry's amusement, the ball often eluded them. They were lucky enough to find a quiet spot to set up their beach umbrella and their beach chairs.

"Harry and Hermione, you must remember to apply sun tan lotion - you won't want to get sun burned," advised Jean as she applied the lotion on her skin herself. Harry and Hermione exchanged looks with each other. They both saw Dan eyeing them closely from the corners of their eyes. However, Hermione blatantly ignored her father, and removed her shirt and shorts so that she was only dressed in her new two-piece swimsuit. Harry nearly passed out from the sight of her body barely covered by her new swimsuit and highlighted her growing curves. It was her slender and shapely legs that nearly made him drool.

Her eyes danced with amusement as she turned away from Harry, hoping to hide her enjoyment at his reaction. A frown briefly crossed his face when he discovered that she was laughing at him.

Harry idly removed his shirt, his muscles rippled at the simple action of discarding his shirt, revealing a lean and toned upper body. His constant sword training with weapons like the Sword of Gryffindor

developed the muscles in his upper torso quite nicely. A smirk appeared on his face when he felt Hermione's eyes on him.

A tit for a tat, Harry thought cheekily. He would normally keep his shirt on, out of habit. He no longer had those long wide awful scars on his back since he'd taken the scar-removing potion in the House last year.

Hermione rolled her eyes in mock annoyance when she heard that thought as she picked up the bottle of sun block.

"Do me a favour, love?" asked Hermione sweetly.

His brows drew into a line as he looked at her warily.

"I won't be able to reach far enough to apply the lotion on my back, so would you mind helping me out?"

Checkmate, she spoke smugly through their shared awareness as she cast an indiscernible glance at her father.

Harry understood at once. Dan was still uncomfortable with them being too affectionate with each other because of their ages.

I really love Dad but his protectiveness over his daughter's virtue is driving me mad, replied Harry as he gave a sigh and looked at Hermione who was lying peacefully on her stomach. He applied the lotion and began rubbing it on her skin but he kept the session as brief as he could.

He could tell from the frown on her face that she wasn't very happy with him when she got up. When it was Hermione's turn to apply sun block on him, she did it languorously, much to Harry's frustration. Hermione caressed every inch of his body that she could lay her hands on, with the pretence of applying the lotion evenly on his skin. He closed his eyes and tried to ignore the sensuous feelings she was evoking with her fingers.

She broke the final straw when she leaned closer to his ear and whispered into it.

"How do you like that, sweetheart?" Hermione murmured. Her warm breath on his ear made him shiver uncontrollably.

He emitted a low growl.

Hermione laughed a pearly laugh as she moved away from him. To his relief, Hermione stopped teasing him.

Harry, fascinated by the beach volleyball game he witnessed earlier, wanted to play the game and so they dragged the two adults out to have a two-on-two game on a makeshift court. Jean and Harry were on one team while Hermione and Dan were on the other. It was Harry's first time playing volleyball and he was surprised when he discovered that Jean could play very well.

"She used to be on the volleyball team when she was younger," answered Hermione as she wiped the beads of perspiration from her forehead. Jean guided him on how to serve and the proper ways to dig, set, and spike the ball. Dan and Hermione weren't too bad at it, either. The game had its comedic moments since they were not accustomed to running on loose sand. It slowed their actions down considerably. Harry was at the mercy of his opponents because of his lack of experience. He fell flat on his face as he dived to catch Dan's powerful spike. He was glad that didn't have glasses anymore because the impact would've definitely cracked them. Harry began to realise that his height was an advantage when it came to blocking and spiking the ball.

Hermione and Dan thrashed Harry and Jean during the first game since the father and daughter team worked so well together. They played on each other's strength as much as possible. Hermione was usually the one who caught the spike or set the ball for Dan to spike. Harry caught on fast as soon as he got used to the sting of hitting the ball and found the proper area on his wrist he could make contact with the ball. He and Jean started to get into rhythm and because of their seamless teamwork, began to score some points against Hermione and Dan. Soon, Harry and Jean were able to beat them, though only by two points.

Their bodies were drenched with perspiration and stuck with patches of sand when they completed a one set game. They each had fallen many times as they dived for the ball. Their faces were flushed due to the sweltering summer heat but they really enjoyed themselves. Harry secretly chilled the drinks with wandless magic before handing the drinks around. His family thanked him profusely for the luxury of quenching their thirst with an icy cool drink. Crookshanks appeared moments later, pestering Hermione for an ice cream. He saw children eating ice cream as he explored the beach and he was looking forward to trying what looked to be a tasty dessert. Craving the icy dessert themselves, the two teenagers took off to buy some as the Grangers lounged around.

They found an ice cream stand as they walked along the long stretch of sandy shore and Harry bought three servings. Crookshanks received one, much to his pleasure. They sat at a bench, watching the frothy white waves crash rhythmically against the sandy shore as they finished their cool treats. Crookshanks was purring in contentment as he lay in the empty space between Harry and Hermione. After they were through, they strolled slowly along the beach, hand in hand, as they enjoyed the sensations of walking barefooted on the soft and white sand. Eventually, they headed back, looking for the adults, and discovered that they were enjoying some quiet time under the shade, reading.

"I want to head into the water, love," said Hermione as she looked longingly at the cool waters that sparkled in the sun. The silvery white water looked so inviting that Hermione was finding it hard to resist.

However, the idea of lazing in the shade appealed to Harry more and he refused to join her, much to her chagrin. Dan noticed the disappointment written on his daughter's face. When Harry was not paying attention on his surroundings, they ganged up on Harry, grabbing him by his legs and arms and tossing him into the water.

There was a loud shout as Harry sailed across the air and fell into the water with a loud splash. He stood up slowly, eyeing his wife in a way that made her back away. Without a warning, he sprinted after Hermione as she ran for her life.

They raced across the shallow waters. Harry was determined to catch her. He instinctively calculated the distance as he closed up on her. With a playfully glint in his eyes, he leapt and wrapped his arms her waist. Hermione let out a squeal before she was felled like a tree into the water. He caged her with his arms as his eyes sparkled with amusement. She stopped giggling when she realised that he was looking at her intently. She cupped his face tentatively as she looked deeply into his eyes.

His startling green eyes were a shade darker than usual and they reflected adoration, protectiveness, infatuation and a hint of lust.

"I just remembered we were rudely interrupted earlier," said Harry huskily as he leaned in. A tender smile briefly graced her face before their lips fused in a passionate kiss.

The two teenagers spent the rest of their afternoon attempting to build a sandcastle with their hands. It was a difficult task since neither of them had the experience of building one. They decided that it would be fun doing it completely without magic. Hermione remembered that building a solid flat platform was the first step and so they began digging and piling sand on a spot.

"I'm really tempted to use the Sword of Gryffindor to dig and pile sand instead of my hands- a sword of a goblin origin should be able to do that much," spoke Harry as he furiously piled up a mountain of sand.

Hermione seemed to be appalled by the idea of using a founder's relic for such a task. With narrowed eyes, she answered, "Don't you dare," warned Hermione.

His eyes danced with amusement. "Don't worry, Mione. I'm not going to do anything that will attract attention. Digging with a broadsword would be quite a sight, don't you think?"

"I bet Gryffindor would jump out of his grave if he knew what his descendant planned to do with his sword." Hermione remarked as she continued form the platform. Harry chuckled as he went to collect water from the sea with a bucket he conjured secretly. He reasoned

that Hermione could only accuse him of using magic if he used a spell to shoot jets of water on the sand pile to make it hard.

He poured buckets of water on the sand as Hermione firmly patted down the sand so that the small platform would be stable enough to build sand structures on it. When the platform was strong enough to hold Harry's weight, they started work on building the real castle.

Harry and Hermione discovered that they couldn't build anything decent on the platform so they thought of an innovative method to create their castle - they carved the small platform as if they were making ice sculptures with a block of ice.

Hermione made some makeshift carving tools with driftwood while Harry began work. Even with large amount of water and constant patting so that the sand would stick, all they could do etch out structure somewhat resembling a castle. It was very different from what they had envisioned, but they were very satisfied. They decorated the castle with beautiful seashells that Hermione took from the shore.

"That looks pretty good," commented Dan as he looked at their finished work critically. Dan had gone out to find the teenagers because it was time to head back. He found them building a structure that was certainly different from the traditional sandcastles children liked to build.

"It's one of a kind, Dad. I don't think anyone has thought of carving castles out of sand blocks," answered Hermione in amusement as she snuggled closer to Harry. The incredulous expression on his face made the teenagers laugh.

They packed up and headed to the car.

The fine white sand touched with the luminous pink of the setting sun was the last sight Harry saw before they turned around and left. Harry was certain that it would be another outing that he would never forget.

The days past quickly as Harry and Hermione spent time with their family and friends. Their days were never dull with so much

happening around them besides their training. Professor McGonagall, aided by Oswald and Sirius, had made all the arrangements to change the dates of the Triwizard tournament. Professor McGonagall was uncomfortable with the idea of waiting for things to simply happen, so a change of dates was made in hopes that it would mess up Riddle's plans. The competition was moved up as a result, starting on the first week of the school. It created many logistical problems but they managed to resolve it. The two schools would have to bring all their eligible students instead of arranging a selection test to decide which group of students would travel to Hogwarts. Luckily, Hogwarts was large enough to house all of them if needed. The headmasters of both schools finally agreed after much persuasion.

There was also another major event they worried about. Right before school started, England was hosting the Quidditch World Cup. The finals were rapidly approaching and most of the Wizarding World could talk about nothing but Quidditch. Hermione was probably the only one who wasn't really interested in the whole affair but she kept her silence as she watched the people around her talk about it spiritedly. Amelia, as usual, was getting more high-strung with each passing day. With the large volume of foreign wizards and witches entering British soil, there was much her department had to do to maintain the secrecy of the Magical World. To her relief, the entire Ministry of Magic would be lending a hand on the days approaching the finals. All the Heads of the Ancient Houses were expected to attend this grand event and they were given top box tickets. Harry was given his own portkey, a golden key that would activate on the 22nd of August, to instantly deliver them whenever they wanted to their Ancient House's designated section. There were enough tickets for all, including the Grangers, but they would have to build cast a protective shield around the Grangers so that they'd get through the strong Muggle repelling wards at the entrance. The idea fuelled everyone's excitement since Dan was looking forward to seeing a professional Quidditch match.

On the day of the final match, Harry felt the familiar sensation of being hooked just behind the navel and jerked irresistibly forward. His feet left the ground, he could feel Hermione and Dan on either side of him and they were speeding forward in a howl of wind and swirling colours. He landed gracefully on his feet when his feet

slammed onto the ground and instinctively reached out to support Dan when his father-in-law began to fall over. Hermione did the same for Jean. Harry glanced around and realised that all his friends and Uncle Moony were all right, though they looked very windswept. The rest of the adults would join them after work. Aunt Amelia was around somewhere, doing crowd control.

"What was that?" Jean questioned in shock as she smoothed her hair. "It's a very uncomfortable way to travel."

Harry nodded in agreement. "Portkey travel takes a lot of getting used to. This is why I prefer to use house elves. Unfortunately, I was not familiar with our destination, so it was best for us to stick to the portkey we were given."

"Good morning, Lord Potter." said a man dressed like a Muggle, though inexpertly. He was wearing a tweed suit with thigh-length galoshes.

"Good morning, will you be able to direct us to our campsite?" enquired Harry courteously.

"Please allow me to show you the way, your Lordship." The man answered with a bow before he led them away. He cast a cursory look at all of his guests but kept mum as he took them across the deserted moor. They could not make out much through the mist but after about ten minutes, a small cottage next to a gate swam into view, beyond it, Harry saw large tents dotting the slope, leading into the dark woods.

The wizard politely bade them goodbye after instructing them to look for Mr. Jones. A man was standing at the doorway of the cottage, watching at the gate. Harry knew at a glance that he was the only real Muggle. When he heard their footsteps, he turned towards them.

Dan stepped forward, putting his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Good morning, would you be Mr. Jones?" asked Dan politely.

"Morning, aye, I would," answered Mr. Jones, "And who're you?"

"I've booked a place under the name of Potter?"

"Aye, the last site up by the wood." Mr. Jones said as he handed him a map. "You don't need to pay. A gentleman by the name of Black has already paid for the expenses."

"My dad said that he booked a site to camp. Do you think that there is a tent large enough to house all of us? " asked Cedric as he looked around the place.

The tents looked like normal two-man tents if they didn't look too closely. Some of the tents even had chimneys.

"I guess this is what sets the four ancient families apart," remarked Susan. "We get to enjoy peace in here. You can hear the distant echo of the ruckus from the main campsite."

"After much discussion, everyone decided to stay together for convenience. It would be too ostentatious to buy several tents," commented Daphne as she looked around.

They followed the meandering path through the lush greenery and past the other tents. As they were closer to the forest, the tents began to look less like tents and more of cottages. It was, after all, a good opportunity to showcase their magic and he was certain these foreign delegates would not be able to resist showing off. Neville and Luna were more fascinated with the living things they could find in the area so they set off to look at them after they had arrived at their campsite.

An unusually tall two man tent was already pitched on the site.

Harry and Hermione exchanged looks between themselves.

"Should I call Sirius?" Harry asked.

"No, I'm sure this is the tent," answered Hermione after scanning the tent carefully.

It looked modest and Jean didn't really think it could fit that many people.

Hermione entered the tent.

There was astonishment in her voice when she beckoned the rest of them in. Intrigued, they entered. The Grangers were shocked by the vastness of the place when they stepped inside. The timber venetians complemented the rich shades of mahogany in the parquet floor. The ivory hand-embroidered curtains fluttered as a gentle breeze rushed through the high-set windows. The living room was large and furnished with comfortable looking furniture.

"I guess you all like to travel in style too," commented Dan as he looked around the place. It looked nothing like a tent inside. They began to explore the tent fully. It boasted of sixteen large bedrooms with their own toilets, a simple kitchen and even a Jacuzzi. There was a barbecue pit outside.

"They sure know how to pick a tent," answered Susan as she sat in a large armchair. "If I'm not wrong, this is one of the most expensive tents on the market." They began to make the sleeping arrangements. The married couples would each have their own rooms, including the Potters. By then it was no secret that Harry and Hermione always shared a room even though they were given their own individual rooms. The Weasley twins and the Greengrass sisters shared rooms and the rest of them had their own rooms.

The tent was a short distance away from the stadium, hidden by the woods. They set off after eating a quick lunch to explore the campsites surrounded the large fields. They could see that their section was the only place free from the hustle and bustle of the events as they approached the city of tents. It stretched in all directions with no sign of an end. They made their way eagerly through the rows, staring around as they introduced the Grangers to a larger world of Wizardry. Elissa had taught Harry and Hermione about the magical worlds beyond Britain but it was an eye opener for them to see foreign witches and wizards in flesh.

Small magical children were running around, playing with their toys in the open. Several of the children were riding on toy broomsticks that rose to about knee-high. A worker from Ministry immediately rushed

past them to stop the children. Harry and Hermione understood why Aunt Am was so worked up. It was difficult to maintain a semblance of secrecy with the blatant exposure of magic in the open.

They walked past several campsites full of students from institutes from abroad, evoking Harry and Hermione's interest.

"We should try to pay these institutes a visit. It would be quite a refreshing experience." Hermione suggested as they walked past a campsite in which a large banner stretched between their tents. It read: The Salem Witches' Institute.

Everyone seemed to be talking excitedly about the upcoming Quidditch match as he caught snatches of conversation in strange languages from the insides of the tents as they passed. They were in shock when they walked into a patch of green. The tents were covered with a thick growth of shamrocks so that it looked as though small, oddly shaped hillocks had sprouted out from the earth. These were definitely the Irish, Harry thought as he smiled.

Seeing the Irish camp made them curious about how the Bulgarians decided to decorate their tents in support of their team.

They walked past the patch of green tents to a patch of tents up field where a Bulgarian flag in red, green, and white was fluttering in the breeze. The tents there had not been bedecked with plant life, but each and every one of them had the same poster attached to it, a poster of a very surly face with heavy eyebrows. The picture was, of course, moving but all it did was blink and scowl.

"Krum," Cedric announced quietly.

"Krum, Victor Krum, the Bulgarian seeker. He's a genius on the field," commented Susan dreamily.

Harry and Hermione shook their heads. Susan definitely had a thing for Quidditch players. They returned to their tent after exploring the campsite. Sirius, Amelia, and the Greengrass family were around the site.

Aunt Amelia was dressed neatly in a business suit as she spoke to a stiff elderly man, dressed impeccably in a crisp suit and tie. The part in his short grey hair was almost unnaturally straight and his narrow toothbrush moustache looked as though he trimmed it using a slide ruler. His shoes were highly polished and he had complied with the rule about dressing like a Muggle so thoroughly that he could have easily passed as a bank manager.

Aunt Amelia had a stern expression on her face as she was talking to him but she cracked a smile when she turned around and saw them.

"Hello, everyone. I'd like you all to meet Mr. Couch, Head of the Department of Magical Cooperation." Amelia announced formally as the elderly man turned to look at them. She then introduced everyone individually and he politely shook hands with them all. He appeared to be an important member of the Ministry from the courteous way Aunt Am treated him.

"I'll look into it, Amelia. I'll need to meet with the Bulgarians. If you see Ludo, please ask him to head over to the pitch," he answered before disappearing.

Amelia expelled a sigh as she turned her attention back to the group. "Technically, I'm supposed to be on leave because of our status but there were just so many things to do and too little time."

Sirius placed an arm around her. "I think you've done a great job. You can trust Barty Crouch to do a splendid job," assured Sirius as he led them inside. "Os is here with his family."

Harry took the opportunity to ask the question that was bothering him.

"Why did you pick this two-man tent?"

"Well, Am is the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. She has to set a good example by being inconspicuous. This tent looks exactly like a Muggle's tent."

"Yes, it does. It wouldn't be inconspicuous when non-magicals realised that twenty people are living in a two man tent," answered Hermione.

Sirius shrugged. "You don't have to worry about Muggles. There are several strong wards in place. One of them repels Muggles. It's really for show," replied Sirius.

Astoria was happy to see her sister and Cedric again. Most of the teenagers spent the afternoon chatting the time away.

A palpable sense of excitement rose over the campsite. By dusk, the still summer air seemed to quivering with anticipation. Harry met many Ministry employees as they apparated near the tent to speak to Amelia. They also got to meet many international delegates who were staying in the same area. When darkness spread like a curtain over the thousands of waiting wizards, the last vestige of pretences disappeared and the Ministry gave up their fruitless battle to prevent the use of magic in the open. No one looked to Amelia for instructions after that, much to her relief.

There was a deep, booming gong sounded somewhere beyond the woods.

"It's just about time," Amelia said. "That's the signal for the spectators to head to the pitch."

"Well, aren't we going to head out as well?"

"No, we'll be leaving with the Delegates and the Minister of Magic." She answered.

Twenty minutes later, a wizard came by and informed them it was time to go.

They made their way out, with their wizard escort in the lead, hurrying down the lantern-lit trail into the wood. Along the way, they picked up some merchandise the sales wizards were selling. There were luminous rosettes - green for Ireland, red for Bulgaria - which were squealing the names of the players, pointed green hats bedecked

with dancing shamrocks, Bulgarian scarves adorned with lions that really roared, and flags from both countries which played their national anthems when they were waved. They bought some Omnioculars, brass binoculars covered with all sort of weird knobs and dials because they reckoned they would need them. The sales wizard assured that they would be able to catch all the action with its zoom, replay and slow motion functions as well and play-by-play breakdown. Aside from the Omnioculars, they bought other things that caught their fancy – most of it green, since they were all supporting Ireland in the match.

They soon found themselves in the shadow of a gigantic stadium. Though Harry could only see a fraction of the immense gold walls surrounding the pitch, he could tell that ten cathedrals could fit inside it comfortably.

The stairs into the stadium were carpeted in rich purple. The Ministry wizard led them up the stairs until they reached the top of the staircase and they found themselves in a small box, set at the highest point of the stadium and situated exactly halfway between the golden goalposts. About twenty purple gilt chairs stood in two rows, and they filed into the front seats. He looked down upon the scene the like of which he could have never imagined.

A hundred thousand witches and wizards were taking their places in the seats that rose in levels around the long oval pitch. Everything was suffused with a mysterious golden light that seemed to come from the stadium itself. The pitch looked as smooth as velvet from their lofty position and they had the birds-eye view of everything. At either side of the pitch stood three goal hoops, fifty feet high; right opposite them, almost at his eye level, was a gigantic blackboard. Golden writing kept dashing across the board as if an invisible hand was writing on it and wiping it off again.

He looked over his shoulder to see who was sharing the box with them and his eyes fell upon a house elf. The creature had its face covered by her hands. He frowned.

"Are you alright?" asked Harry with concern.

The tiny creature parted its fingers and looked up at him, revealing enormous brown eyes.

"Did sir just ask how is I?" the house elf spoke with a teeny quivering squeak of a voice.

"Yes, I did."

"Winky's not liking heights, sir. Master sends me to the Top Box and I comes, sir. You is Lord Potter?"

"Yeah, I am," answered Harry.

"You is Dobby's master," answered Winky with a hint of awe.

He raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Why, yes, I am."

"Good evening, Lord Potter." Another wizard spoke as he extended his hand. Sirius took the time to introduce Harry to all the other wizards that were in the box. Lucius, Narcissa, and Draco Malfoy politely greeted them along with the other wizards who were going to sit in the box with them. The Weasleys were already there: Arthur Weasley, Bill, Charlie, Percy, Ron and Ginny were sitting at one end of the front row of the box. Fred and George greeted their father and older brothers. Ginny chatted with them for a while. There was a hint of dislike in Percy's eyes but he greeted Harry politely in the presence of powerful Ministry wizards. The Minister of Magic appeared with his Bulgarian counterpart and he was pleased to see Harry again though Harry wasn't too pleased to see him.

Minister Oblansk, the Bulgarian Minister of Magic was excited to meet Harry and they conversed briefly in his native language, impressing most of the wizards in the Top Box. The minister was further impressed when Hermione was able to join in the conversation too.

A man entered the box. He was wearing long Quidditch robes in thick horizontal strips of bright yellow and black with an enormous picture of a wasp was splashed across his chest. He had a look of a powerfully built man gone slightly to seed; the robes were stretched tightly across a large belly that he surely didn't have in the days he

had played Quidditch for England. (Sirius whispered to Harry that the man used to play for England) His round blue eyes, short blond hair, and rosy complexion made him look like an overgrown schoolboy.

Ludo Bagman, Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports did the smallest of double takes when he saw Harry and his eyes performed the familiar annoying flick upwards to the scar on Harry's forehead. He greeted him warmly with a handshake.

"Everyone ready?" He said, his round face gleaming with excitement. "Minister, are you ready to go?"

"Ready when you are Ludo," said Fudge comfortably.

He performed the Sonorous charm and spoke over the roar of sounds that filled the packed stadium; his voice echoed above them, booming into every corner of the stands: "Ladies and gentlemen... Welcome! Welcome to the finals of the four hundred and twenty second Quidditch World Cup!"

The spectators screamed and clapped. Thousands of flags waved, adding their discordant national anthems to the racket. The huge blackboard facing them was cleared of all advertisement and now showed the scoreboard for Ireland and Bulgarian.

He introduced the Bulgarian Team Mascots.

The right-hand side of the stands, which was a solid block of scarlet, cheered as a hundred of Veelas gliding onto the pitch. Veelas were women with skin that shined like moonlight and had white-gold hair that fanned out behind them even without a breeze. They began to dance to the music. Harry relaxed into his seat and watched. There were many men in the stands who appeared to want to leap out of their seats to join them on the pitch. He remembered from his lessons that the Veelas had the power to bewitch males.

Suddenly, the music stopped and the crowds began to boo when the Veelas retreated to the side of the pitch. There was a bright smile on Hermione's face as she looked at him. Harry reached out and held her hand.

"Kindly put your wands in the air for the Irish National Team Mascots!"

A great green and gold comet had come zooming into the stadium. It did one circuit of the stadium then split into two smaller comets, each hurtling towards the goalposts. A rainbow arced across the pitch, connecting the two balls of light. The rainbow faded and the balls of light reunited and merged; they had formed a great shimmering shamrock, which rose up into the sky and soared over the stands. Something like golden rain seemed to be falling from it. The golden rain was really golden coins and the shamrock was composed of thousands of tiny little bearded men with red waistcoats, each carrying a minute lamp of gold or green.

"Leprechauns," said Hermione.

The great shamrock dissolved and they drifted down onto the pitch on the opposite side from the Veelas and settled themselves cross-legged to watch the match.

Bagman introduced the Bulgarian team and they came shooting onto the pitch from an entrance far below to the wild applause from the Bulgarian supporters. However, the applause was the loudest when the youngest member of the team flew nimbly out from the entrance to join his teammates.

Victor Krum was thin, dark, and sallow-skinned, with a large curved nose and thick black eyebrows; it was hard to believe that he was only seventeen.

The Irish team flew onto the pitch when their names were called as the crowd cheered wildly.

The referee finally appeared, dressed in a suit of gold and the game began when he whistled.

The speed of the game was incredible and the Chasers were throwing the Quaffle so fast that Bagman could only say their names.

The names appeared on the bottom of the screen as he watched through his Omnioculars.

Finally, Ireland scored and they began dancing up and down, waving their arms in the air.

The Irish Chasers were superb and they worked as a seamless team, appearing to read each other's mind from the way they positioned themselves. The match grew faster but more brutal after Ireland led for a while. They sat on the edge of their seats, unable to unpeel their eyes from the action.

There was a foul and Ireland was given the penalty. After that penalty, the play now reached a level of ferocity beyond anything they had yet seen.

Krum was the most exciting player in the match; it was hard not to see why he was so idolised.

Someone crashed onto him, breaking his nose but he continued to play with blood spurting everywhere.

The game finally ended with Ireland winning but Krum caught the snitch.

"He was very brave, wasn't he?" said Hermione, leaning forward to watch Krum land, and the swarms of mediwizards blasting through the battling leprechauns and Veela to get to him. The Irish players did a lap of honour as gold coins rained upon them.

The Quidditch World Cup was brought to the Top Box and the place was magically illuminated so everyone could see the insides. The Bulgarian team landed to shake hands with their minister and Fudge. Krum looked like a bloody mess with two black eyes blooming spectacularly as he queued up. His fist was still tightly wrapped around the golden snitch.

The applause was deafening when Krum went up to shake the hands of the Ministers.

The winning team came next, looking dazed that they have just won. Everyone stood up and cheered for them when they hoisted the cup into the air.

Harry, along with the rest of his family and friends, yelled till he lost his voice.

A/N: Hi, everyone. Thank you for your reviews. Did you managed to guess what Hermione would give? Anyway, it is true that in order to build a professional sandcastle, you need to make large you do it right, it is a large hard structure that can hold a person's weight. Well, the terror part comes next. I hope you'll have a good week ahead.

Chapter 27

Beta-read by Frustr8dwriter

Raucous singing could be heard from a distance. With the level of excitement in the air, it was impossible for any of them to fall asleep. Everyone gathered in the large sitting room of Harry and Hermione's cottage to have one last drink before turning in. Unfortunately, Amelia was called in for duty to control the rowdy crowd and Sirius accompanied her, leaving the rest behind. They were soon arguing amiably about the match. Dan enthusiastically participated in the play-by-play discussion and it was clear that he enjoyed the match immensely - just like the rest of his magical counterparts.

It wasn't until Luna fell asleep on the couch that the adults asked everyone to turn in. Sleepily, the teenagers slowly made their way back to their respective cottages and rooms. Hermione and Harry quietly undressed before climbing on their bed. Hermione instinctively snuggled up to Harry as he put his arms around her.

There was a distant echo of the noise from the main campsite but Harry felt his eyelids drooping as he felt the peace of being in close contact with his wife. His mind drifted off to the Wronski Feint and other spectacular moves Krum had made and tried to imagine himself doing the same.

"It was a brilliant idea taking my parents to the match. They really had a good time." Hermione whispered suddenly as she made circles on his chest.

In the darkness, he cracked a smile. "Yes, they did, didn't they? Dad couldn't stop going on about it. It took Mum some time to persuade him to go to bed. I wouldn't be surprised if Dad is still talking about the match right now," answered Harry.

"I'm sure that's exactly what he's doing. Dad has the tendency to do that. Are you going to try out some of Krum's moves once we're back?" Hermione asked knowingly, with a hint of amusement.

"Of course. Wood has never really able to explain what a Wronski Feint should look like with his wiggling diagrams. Now that I've seen someone pull it off, I'm confident I can do it," replied Harry as he lovingly stroked hair. "We should go to sleep. I'm sure we'll have lots to do as soon as we get home."

"Yes, like trimming your hair. It's getting a bit wild, even for you."

Harry let out a chuckle. "What? You don't like it long and messy?"

"You look good with your hair shorter." Hermione answered.

"Very well, I'll get a haircut as soon as we get back." answered Harry. "Now, off to the land of nod for both of us."

His proposition was irresistible - his rhythmic caressing of her hair and the steady beating of his heart were inducing her to sleep. Her breathing soon evened out and she fell into a deep slumber.

A smile of contentment appeared on his lips when he saw that her mind was still – a clear indication that she was finally asleep. He closed his eyes and followed suit.

The beeping of Harry's watch woke the couple up immediately. Harry's sense went into full alert when he realised that Sirius was calling him. There was an unnatural silence between them.

Something's wrong, Hermione commented, as she got dressed immediately, tossing him some clothes. I'm going to wake up the rest, she said as she disappeared out of the door.

"Sirius, what's up?" Harry asked as put on his pants.

He could hear people screaming from the background.

"There has been a situation. You need to take everyone and leave immediately. Make sure to keep the Grangers out of sight." He insisted frantically.

There were sounds of people blasting spells in the background and the noises were getting louder.

"Bloody Merlin, I need to go now. Remember, don't delay, you must get out of there now! Be careful!"

With that abrupt parting, he closed off the communication between them.

There was definitely trouble up at the camping site. It would take a while for trouble to reach their end of the campsite, but they had no time to lose.

Harry immediately dashed out of his room after shoving his arms into his shirt. Dan, Jean, Luna, Susan, and Neville were already waiting in the living room. Although still dressed in only their nightclothes, they were alert and waiting for instructions.

"Hermione said there was an emergency," said Jean with a hint of anxiety in her voice. "She has gone over to wake the rest."

His face was grim. "Yes, there's something big happening over at the main campsite. Sirius and Amelia are over there trying to help handle the situation, but it's bad enough that we've got to leave." Harry explained. A minute later, Hermione arrived with the rest of their friends, simply dressed with jackets over their nightclothes. Oswald and Felicia were with her, looking alert despite being rudely awakened. Remus Lupin had dashed off to lend a hand.

"Whoever is causing the commotion has also cast wards to prevent escape by apparation or portkey. My house elf couldn't come to me when I called for him." Oswald announced. "We need to get to the forest - maybe we'll have better luck there."

Harry nodded in agreement. It was their safest bet for the moment.

"Wands out, everyone. We're heading out." Harry instructed and he hurried out, leading his friends and family towards the dark forest.

There were odd flashes of light and noises like gunfire. Loud jeering, roars of laughter and drunken yells could be heard, accompanied by sounds of running and frantic screaming. Dark columns of smoke marked the tents that had been burned. The air was still and thick with the scent of smoke and perspiration. In the distance, there were even more tents on fire. It was a picture of complete chaos as countless numbers of people dashed haphazardly away from the flames.

"We've got to keep moving, Harry. They might catch up to us," reminded Hermione as she checked the group. Everyone was on their heels and Oswald was covering their backs. Their faces were white with fear as they realized the situation they were in – the campsite was under attack.

"Hurry up and stay close; we've no time to lose!" Harry shouted as he dashed towards the forest. The lantern lit path had been extinguished and darkness enshrouded them as they entered the forest. There, dark figures were blundering through the trees; children were crying; anxious shouts and panicked voices were reverberating around them in the cold night air. It took a lot of effort not to lose anyone in the process. They walked deeper into the heart of the forest. There, the screaming had faded into a distant echo. Thinking that they were a safe distance from the campsite, Harry summoned Charles, Dobby, and Gareth.

The three figures appeared immediately, much to their relief. It was apparent that the wards did not reach this far into the forest.

"Take as many as you can to Potter Mansion," commanded Harry.

"Harry, please make sure that they get back safely. Fel and I are going to help the Ministry." Oswald shouted after he summoned one of his own house elves. Harry acknowledged with a curt nod. They turned around and ran out of the forest after a failed attempt at apparation.

Moments later, there was a huge commotion as the sounds of gunfire grew louder. The chaos seemed to be getting closer.

"Hurry," shouted Harry anxiously. The house elves immediately grabbed whomever they could reach and disappeared first. There were only enough house elves to bring his family and friends to Potter Mansion, leaving Harry and Hermione behind.

More dark figures were running towards them, trying to escape.

The dream he had of Voldemort and the terror he saw in the faces of the fleeing crowd made Harry curious. He fought against the flow of the crowds in his attempt to catch a glimpse.

Harry, no! Hermione shouted through their shared awareness.

The branches were no longer obscuring much of his sight but he was still a distance away from the edge of the forest. From his position, he could see from a crowd of wizards, tightly packed and moving together with wands pointing straight upwards, marching slowly past the burnt tents that stood at the edge of the forest. Their heads were hooded and they were wearing masks. The sight sent a chill down his spine. Floating above them, were a family of Muggles screaming in mid-air as they were contorted into grotesque shapes. It was as if the wizards on the ground were their puppeteers.

They were hooting and screeching in glee as they made the Muggles do strange stunts. The two children floating in mid-air were crying out of sheer panic as the onlookers laughed. He could see the Ministry wizards having difficulty fighting their way through the crowd to the centre where the hooded wizards stood.

Death Eaters.

The sight of the young children being tormented broke his control.

"That's sick!" Harry exclaimed as anger overtook him. He dashed through the trees, towards them.

Wait, Harry! Hermione shouted mentally.

Her voice was feeble compared to the waves of rages that were washing through him.

He dashed through the thick undergrowth, past the branches to the outskirts of the forest. There, he kept still: like a predator watching his prey. He had enough wits about him to disillusion himself and keep hidden among the trees where no one could see him. Hermione stopped beside him and she whispered the same incantation. She crouched and slowly moved to his side so that she could see everything.

The campsite, a lively place in the morning, was void of all people but the hooded wizards standing in the middle. Fire was consuming every tent that stood in its path, burning and destroying. They were completely surrounded by burning tents and smoke. The hooded wizards were still laughing. The sound of their mirth grated his nerves, egging his anger on. The air grew tense as he began to radiate magical energy. Tapping on his powers, he manipulated his fire element to cause a rapid spread of fire in the direction of the wizards. The fire encircled them, scorching them, giving them no room to escape. The laughing soon changed into screams of pain as the ever-burning fire began to burn the hooded wizards and break their concentration.

Harry could have laughed at their anxiety when they realised that they couldn't put off the flames by water if he hadn't notice the Muggles falling into the flames.

He heaved a sigh of relief when Hermione used her wind element to lower them safely into the ground, outside of the ring of fire. None of the wizards, distracted by the magical flames, noticed this peculiarity. The Muggles blinked several times in confusion but soon recovered. The two adult Muggles immediately grabbed their crying children and made their getaway. A smile of triumph appeared on Harry's face.

The Ministry workers are approaching. We have to go. You can stop using your fire element once we're a distance away from here. Hermione thought as she looked at him. Harry dipped his head in agreement and stood up. Fatigue overcame him and he staggered slightly. Hermione grabbed him immediately. The twigs cracked beneath their feet.

Good Merlin!

The flames surrounding their bodies disappeared as suddenly as they came, surprising the hooded wizards.

"Who's there? Show yourself!" One of the hooded wizards shouted in a magically distorted voice as he pointed his wand in their direction.

We'll take them by surprise, answered Harry. He raised himself up slowly, running purely on adrenaline.

Suddenly, there was a shout that came a distance away from them.

"MORSMORDRE!"

A colossal skull, composed of what looked like emerald stars with a serpent protruding from its mouth like a tongue, appeared in the sky. As they watched, it rose higher and higher blazing in a haze of greenish smoke, etched against the dark sky like a new constellation.

The screams grew louder and the hooded men panicked at the sight in the sky. They disappeared in a series of popping noises.

"It's the Dark Mark, Harry," shouted Hermione in panic. "We need to leave, now. Charles!"

Harry held Hermione's arm as he protested loudly, "He could have seen us!"

"If we don't leave, the Ministry workers will find us!" Hermione snapped. "We are at the scene of crime."

Charles appeared instantly.

Ignoring Harry, she instructed Charles to take both of them back.

Harry buckled when he finally reached his home. His friends and family worriedly gathered around them. They helped them to some seats as they got warm beverages for them. Hermione looked better than Harry since she didn't foolishly use a large amount of magical

power like he did. Some of the house elves disappeared in a series of pops to retrieve their belongings from the campsite.

Harry left the recounting of the entire incident to Hermione as he sulked in silence. He immediately threw up his mental walls as soon as they reached the Mansion. It was foolish he knew, but he was pissed that Hermione had dragged him home against his will.

The rest of their family and friends were too concerned about what happened to notice that Harry was trying to ignore Hermione.

With baffled look on her face, Jean asked, "The numbers of wizards there far outnumbered the hooded wizards. Why didn't they fight instead of running away?"

"These hooded wizards are Death Eaters. They were the followers of Lord Voldemort. Seeing them tends to strike fear in most wizards' hearts," answered Harry quietly as he crossed his arms.

Neville turned pale at the mention of the Death Eaters and Luna placed a comforting hand on his arm. It was as if she understood the reason for his trepidation.

"I would agree. A majority of the wizards would rather stay and fight - usually leaving it to the Ministry to handle," added Susan in a soft voice as she averted her eyes. "That was one of reasons why You-Know-Who was so powerful, even though he only commanded a small group. Besides, he was wise enough to attack the powerhouses of society to strike fear. My parents, Harry's grandparents and parents, and nearly all of the Blacks perished in the war. Their deaths caused a rift between the Greengrasses and the Bones." Susan went on sadly. Daphne put an arm around Susan to comfort her.

"Killing non-magicals for fun was something that was very common during those times." Cedric admitted grimly.

The faces of Dan and Jean grew ashen.

"What happened to wizards and witches of pure non-magical descent?" Dan asked worriedly as he searched the faces in the room. None of them were eager to reply.

"They were seen and treated like Muggles by the Death Eaters," answered Hermione as she looked into her father's eyes. His brows were drawn into a frown as he looked at her.

There was silence in the room.

"You know that I wouldn't let anything happen to Hermione." Harry declared fiercely, drawing the attention of everyone in the room. "I'd do anything in my power keep her safe."

"I don't think they were working under Voldemort's instructions, so you don't have to worry," remarked Cedric as he rubbed his smooth chin. "I mean from what you've told me, they were petrified when they saw the mark and disappeared at once. After all, the Death Eaters that are out of prison won't be too happy to know that their Master has returned after they've betrayed him."

"Then why did they make an appearance?"

"I guess all that celebrating went to their heads," commented Daphne with a frown. "We really need to get to bed if we want to run before dawn." There was a glint of determination in her eyes as she looked at the rest of them. The rest of the teenagers agreed and headed straight to bed. Since they had to go to work the next day, the Grangers headed upstairs to rest after hugging Hermione and Harry. Their hugs were longer than usual but the Grangers kept their silence.

Hermione sat in the living room, lost in her thoughts as she frowned. There was a slight tension in the air. Harry was still feeling slightly miffed that Hermione had dragged him back home against his will. He was certain that Hermione could sense it because she was being unusually quiet.

Unable to stand the tension, he began pacing around the room.

"We were disillusioned. There is a chance that the person who set off the Dark Mark might not have seen us," spoke Hermione briskly as she looked into the flames.

"You didn't have to instruct Charles to grab me like an errant child," growled Harry as he stood still and stared at his wife.

Hermione turned her head so that she was meeting his gaze.

"What would you have done if I hadn't called for Charles? Would you have found the person before the Ministry workers found us? How would we have explained our presence? Some of those Death Eaters tonight have connections with the Ministry. With time, they can connect the dots and figure out who the culprits were who set the fire upon them."

Harry faltered slightly as he lowered his head. "I'm sorry, Hermione. You're right." He drew his hand through his hair carelessly.

The lines on Hermione's face softened, seeing that he truly regretted his words.

"I'm sorry for making you feel that way, Harry."

He brightened immediately and Hermione returned the smile before she grew thoughtful. His brows drew into a frown as he placed his hand on her arm. He knew exactly what was bothering her.

Mum and Dad will be safe, Harry thought as he looked at her. His eyes were gleaming with the promise.

How much time do we have? We've seen what's left of the Death Eaters throwing their weight around and now there's the appearance of the Dark Mark. The dream said that he'll put a faithful servant in Hogwarts and school is starting soon. Hermione returned worriedly.

"I don't know, Mione. What I do know is I'll be careful, for your sake. We'll be sharing this armchair again next year, hopefully not talking about Riddle," answered Harry aloud as he took her hand and brushed his lips past her knuckles.

Hermione smiled before giving a yawn.

A smile appeared on his face, happy that things were all right between them.

"Let's head to bed, Harry," answered Hermione as she stood up. "Daph is right, you know. We need to get some rest if we are going for a run tomorrow."

"Haven't we run enough? Didn't we just run into hiding just now?" Harry joked as he took her hand. Hermione swatted him on his arm before they retreated to their bedroom.

The tired faces of Oswald, Felicia, Remus, Sirius, and Amelia greeted the teenagers as they prepared for their morning run. Anxious to hear what happened after they left, they led the adults to the living room for a brief respite. Amelia and Sirius had to return to the office early after the events that took place the previous night. They had apparated to Potter Mansion immediately after they had cleaned up the scene.

"Many needed treatment from the stampede and the burning tents. I'm sure there'll be a lot of mail waiting for me with wizards complaining about the lack of security. We didn't have a ward breaker on hand so we couldn't break the wards that prevented escape." Amelia admitted tiredly as she slumped into her seat, giving a sigh of relief since she was up on her feet the entire night.

Charles gave the adults a Pepper-up potion each and they heartily expressed their gratitude after they downed their vials.

"It sounds like a well- thought out plan," commented Harry.

"It's easy to cast those wards. The most worrying part is that those people acted as though they were thoroughly familiar with the Ministry. They knew that the biggest problem we expected last tonight was trying not to reveal our secrets to the Muggles and not terror attacks. We caught none of them." Amelia said.

"You know plenty of Death Eaters that were not convicted," answered Sirius. "The Dark Mark was cast last night. That'll be something that everyone will be talking about in the papers today."

"Did you catch the person who cast the Dark Mark? Were there any fatalities?" Cedric asked.

"No one died, thank Merlin. We apparated immediately to the site where the Dark Mark was cast and your father found someone. As usual, Crouch dismissed her in a heartbeat for the disgrace she brought to his name." answered Sirius as he frowned.

(Flashback)

Red light weaved in and out, bouncing off the trees to form an intricate web of stunners.

The forest became still when the wizards stopped firing stun spells.

"We're too late," said one of the Ministry witches, shaking her head. "They must've disappeared."

"I'm not so sure," Amos Diggory began. "They could've run into the forest for cover and since our stunners went right through those trees, there is a good chance we got them." Squaring his shoulders, he raised his wand and marched across the clearing into the forest.

A few seconds later, they heard him shout.

"Yes! We got them! Unconscious! It's- but - blimey..."

"You've got someone? Who is it?" Crouch shouted.

There was the snapping of twigs, rustling of leaves, and then crunching of footsteps as Diggory re-emerged from the forest, carrying a tiny limp figure in his arms. Crouch did not move or speak as he deposited Crouch's elf on the ground at his feet. The other Ministry wizards were staring at Crouch. For a few seconds, he remained transfixed, his eyes blazing in his white face as he stared down at Winky. Then he appeared to come to life again.

"This cannot be," Crouch said jerkily. "No-"

He moved quickly around Diggory and strode off towards the place where he had found Winky.

"There's no point, Mr Crouch. There's no one there," Diggory called after him.

However, Crouch continued his search.

"She's but a house elf." Sirius said impatiently as he leaned against the tree. "She'd need a wand to cast that spell."

"She had a wand, Lord Black." He answered, holding up a wand and showing it to him.

Crouch appeared minutes later, empty-handed. His face was still ghostly white and his hands were still trembling. Sirius frowned. "A lot has happened tonight. I think it's time to wake Winky up so that we can hear what she has to say for herself."

"Enervate!"

Winky stirred feebly. Her great brown eyes opened and she blinked several times in a bemused fashion. Watched by the silent wizards, she raised herself shakily into position. She caught sight of Diggory's feet and slowly looked up to stare at his face; then, more slowly still, she looked up into the sky. She gave a gasp and burst into terrified sobs.

"Elf! Do you know who I am? I am the Head of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. As you can see the Dark Mark was conjured here a short while ago and you were discovered moment later, right beneath it! An explanation if you please!" Diggory roared.

"I-I-I is not doing it, Sir!" Winky gasped. "I is not knowing how, sir!"

"You were found with a wand in the hand!" Diggory barked.

"I is not doing magic with it, Sir!" squealed Winky, tears streaming down the sides of her nose. "I is just... just... picking it up, Sir. I is not making the Dark Mark, Sir. I is not knowing how!"

"You've been caught red-handed, elf! Caught with a guilty wand in hand!" Mr. Diggory roared loudly.

"Don't be daft, Diggory. Only a precious few wizards know how to cast this spell. She probably picked up the wand," answered Weasley. He turned to face the frightened house elf.

"Where did you pick up the wand, Winky?" Weasley asked kindly.

"Over there in the trees, sir." She whispered.

"Amos," Crouch began curtly. "I'm well aware that you'll need to take her in for questioning. I ask you, however, to let me deal with her."

"You may be rest assured that she'll be punished." Crouch added coldly. There was no pity in his face.

Sirius gave a grunt that expressed his disgust. "You proclaim her guilty before it is even proven?"

Crouch whipped his head around, staring frostily at Sirius.

"Lord Black, I believe it is my choice how to punish my servants. I do not have a need for house elves that disobey me."

"No!" Winky screamed, prostrating herself at Crouch's feet. "No, Master. Not clothes! Not clothes!"

Crouch took a step backwards, freeing himself from the contact with the elf, whom he was surveying as though she was something filthy and rotten that was contaminating his over-shined shoes.

"I have no use for a servant who forgets her duty to her master and her master's reputation."

Winky was crying so hard that her sobs echoed around the clearing.

(End of flashback)

"He gave clothes to Winky simply because she didn't follow his instructions to stay in the tent and not allow herself to be trampled by the crowd?" Hermione questioned incredulously.

"No, he gave clothes to his servant because she disgraced him. Don't forget that he even placed his only son in Azkaban after he was caught with a group of Death Eaters," replied Sirius as he shook his head.

"He was the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement during the dark times and took drastic measures against those who supported the Dark side. He was willing to use unforgivable curses against those who were suspect of supporting the Dark Lord and many people supported him until his son was caught with a group of Death Eaters trying to revive the Dark Lord. He placed his son in Azkaban along with the rest of the Death Eaters. Only the fact that Crouch was his father, allowed Barty Jr. a trial. Then his son died in Azkaban, followed by his wife. Crouch, who was primed to be the next Minister of Magic, lost the job to Fudge and was demoted to head the Department of International Magical Co-operation after many sympathised with his son," explained Amelia. "I took over the Department after that."

"What happened last night couldn't have been done under the Dark Lord's instruction because many things could've gone wrong with that kind of shoddy planning. The Dark Lord has always been very meticulous and if he wants to make a statement, he would do it properly and flamboyantly. There were some Ministry wizards that were close enough to see the reactions of the Death Eaters when the Dark Mark was cast into the sky and they reported that they panicked and fled at once, clearly suggesting that whoever who cast the mark was not part of the group and they didn't anticipate it." Sirius said.

"Couldn't have also been a sign for them to flee?" Hermione questioned.

"I'm not entirely sure. The purpose wasn't really to strike fear per se. It was more of them reliving the past," said Amelia darkly. "However, as Sirius has pointed out, it was definitely not spearheaded by the Dark Lord so we don't have to worry – at least not any more that we already are."

"It's going to be mayhem later at the Ministry," predicted Remus Lupin as he made a sour face. "I don't envy you, Am. You know that Fudge will pin it on your department when he is called to answer the public. I'd bet twenty Galleons on it."

"Thanks a lot, Remus," added Amelia sarcastically. "It is rightfully our fault. After all, we were nothing but sitting ducks. There was insufficient crowd control, lack of planning for an emergency escape, the Aurors were unable to break through the crowd to get to the site they needed just because they couldn't apparate, and there was definitely a break in communication. Did I miss anything?" Amelia asked tersely as she began to tick off the items on her fingers.

"I wouldn't fancy reporting to you, Am." Oswald admitted as he winced. "I think most of your department will be dead once you're through with them."

"True, if we're not eaten alive by the public," replied Amelia as she shook her head. "No, I'll just have to draft a new plan to update their training. I'll be heading home first to do that draft before I return to office. Don't expect me to be in early."

"I'll lend you a hand," offered Sirius as he stood up. Amelia gave him a glowing look before they left.

The exhausted adults went upstairs to catch up on some sleep while the teenagers continued with their morning run. The atmosphere was slightly different, it seemed more tense than usual and everyone wanted to push themselves to the limit.

Amos Diggory sent an urgent message during breakfast, asking Cedric to return home immediately and he had no choice but to comply. He borrowed several books he would need to continue with

his training back at home and left after exchanging goodbyes with Daphne privately.

It turned out that the adults were right. The front page of the paper carried a picture of the Dark Mark above the forest at the World Cup. The article talked about the blunders of the Ministry and painted a bleaker picture than it originally was.

"I believe Fudge will have to do more to calm the public down," commented Harry as he set the paper down. Rita Skeeter of course, wrote the article.

"That whole write-up is nothing but absolute speculation." Hermione remarked, frowning. "At least she didn't pin it all on Aunt Am's department."

"Since she doesn't, Fudge will do so to save his skin," added Lupin. "It still amazes me that he was elected Minister of Magic."

"He fought for harsher stand against Werewolves and Vampires and that got him a lot of support," replied Oswald as he scanned through the paper briefly. "Let's hope someone good replaces him once his term ends."

The rest of the afternoon was spent on self-defence lessons and magical combat.

Most of them had finished with their sparring except for a pair.

"I must defeat you at least once, Harry," declared Neville as he stood at the other end of the duelling platform, surprising everyone.

Harry arched an eyebrow in surprise, but nevertheless accepted his challenge.

Neville's brows were drawn into a line, beads of perspiration were on his face as he mustered all his will and stood up against a formidable opponent. It was the third time he had taken a spell straight on the chest and was floored. It had been almost one hour since the spar began. They started out strong, shooting spells as they dodged.

However, it became clear that Harry had more stamina than Neville. As Neville grew tired, he lost his dexterity and was subjected to several offensive spells. It was to the extent that he could take, but Neville refused to give up for some reason.

"Nev?" asked Harry worriedly as he lifted up his wand. He looked at Remus, silently asking him to end the match. However, Remus was adamant in not stopping the match.

"Don't go easy on me!" Neville growled.

Neville pulled himself up and shot another hex in Harry's direction and Harry ducked the spell by sidestepping. "Nev, don't fight it if you can't go on. You're almost at your magical limit."

His answer was another hex shot directly at him.

Harry smiled, seeing the determination in his eyes. Since the day he had met him, this was the first time Harry saw Neville truly determined about anything. As a friend, he had to honour his determination with a good fight.

Harry ended the duel quickly with several powerful and well-chosen hexes, causing Neville to collapse on the floor in a loud 'thud'. Remus gave him a pepper-up potion and levitated him to the couch for some rest.

His grey eyes were full of concern when he looked at Neville.

"It's good that you want to put your all into the duel, but it was downright reckless of you," scolded Remus. "If you want to grow stronger, you'll need time."

"I know. I'm sorry. Thank you for allowing me to fight on," answered Neville. Luna sat next to him, offering him a towel as she smiled. It was as if she knew the reason for his perseverance. Neville took it, returned the smile, and rested. He was much too knackered to do anything else. Harry and Hermione exchanged looks, wondering what made their good friend so resolute.

The night air was cool and refreshing. The sky was a large canvas with gleaming stars painted on it. Lying on the ground, he breathed in the fresh scent of grass that was surrounding him and tried to will himself to become one with his environment.

He could feel the tension leaving his body as he tried to get in tune with nature.

It seemed to open the door to a new world. There was a multitude of sounds he had never heard or paid much attention to. It was disconcerting; his senses were overloaded with the new smells and the sounds around him. It took some getting used to and when he did, he tried to identify every sound he could hear. He didn't know that leaves would rustle in that pitch as the wind gently ruffled them in its path. He could identify Hermione's gentle and even breathing a short distance away from him. When the wind blew across her to him, he could smell that faint vanilla scent he always associated with her. He smiled inwardly. Even in mediating, he could not help but pay attention to her. The way her body lay so still beside him, he knew that without her, everything would seem so incomplete.

Hedwig was up in one of the trees to his right probably hidden by the thick branches of the tree. He could hear the slightly crackling of leaves as she turned her head to keep watch.

He could hear Crookshanks' gentle breathing. He was lying very still near to Hermione, not making a sound.

As he began to expand his awareness slightly, his senses were bombarded by the noises of the forests. It was alive! What would it feel like moving swiftly through the undergrowth? An image of running freely through the forest filled his mind. He knew that freedom. Ever since they had tied the knot more than a year ago, he was free. He was free to make his choice, to be what he wanted, to protect the people he cared for and to stay with a family.

He slowly opened his eyes, feeling the urge to make it his. He eyed his wife closely. His wife as if sensing his presence, lazily cracked her eye. He smiled when he saw the blissful and untroubled peace on her face.

"I have a request I have to make," said Harry as he looked sheepishly at her. Lifting one of his locks, he asked, "May I?"

The intellectual Hermione set in immediately and she nodded.

"Diffindo," said Harry as he cut a small lock of her wavy brown hair. A frown of confusion crossed his face as he stared at her lock of hair stupidly.

"Is that a token?" Hermione finally asked as she sat up.

"I think so. I just wanted it so much," replied Harry as he looked at her.

"Harry, you're well on your way on becoming an Animagus!" Hermione proudly declared as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Thank you," answered Harry as he returned the hug, carefully not to drop her lock of hair. He hurriedly stuffed it into his pocket.

"I wonder when I'll get my first token." Hermione thought aloud as she gave him a nervous smile.

"Don't fret, love. I'm sure it'll be soon. Who knows? You might collect the tokens faster once you've found your first." Harry assured as he cupped her face and kissed her forehead tenderly.

Her eyes reflected confusion as she wondered at the motivation of that kiss.

"I can't imagine what things would be like without you," explained Harry amorously. He kissed her nose. "That's to thank you for chasing after me last night."

"And this is to thank you for saving me last night." He whispered softly, his warm breath fanning across her face. Hermione's eyes fluttered close as Harry tilted his head slightly.

His lips brushed across her lips tentatively at first. Her hands curled around the base of his neck, pulling him closer so that the pressure on her lips would increase. His lips moved skilfully across hers before he caught her bottom lip with his teeth and nibbled gently. His hands slid slowly down to the base of her back causing her to arch and moan delectably. Their bodies were soon pressed against each other as they continued to explore each other's mouth ardently. They soon lost track of time in the heat of passion as they made out under the starry sky.

It was a long while later that the couple drew away to breathe. Harry stared at her with lust-filled eyes as he panted. Hermione lifted her hands to caress his cheeks slowly as she murmured, "You're welcome."

"Why, that was quite a display of affections. I didn't think that you had it in you," spoke Sirius as he chuckled. He was standing by the backdoor, looking at the couple with amusement. "I think you should head upstairs if you want to continue in private, after all, everyone has been watching you." He discreetly gestured upwards.

Harry and Hermione looked up and saw several heads disappearing abruptly back into the window. Harry helped Hermione up, his eyes dancing in amusement. They had always made sure that these sessions were private. Hell was going to break loose when Hermione got her hands on their peeping friends.

Harry took her hand and led her inside.

Harry had always wondered how Amelia Bones managed to get to her current position despite her age and her gender. After all, she was the youngest of all Department Heads and the only high-ranking woman in the Ministry. Initially, he had thought it was her station as of Head of an Ancient and Noble Family that enabled her to be appointed as the Head of such a powerful and important department. His assumption turned out to be wrong - she definitely had earned her position.

She had dealt with the fallout of the World Cup immediately, losing no time pushing on the agenda for more combat training. The public

demanded an explanation about the 'Terror at World Cup', Minister Fudge blatantly shifted the blame to Amelia's department even though she was just standing by his side. She kept her cool during the session with the press but made known her displeasure to the Fudge in his office in private after it ended. Harry would have done anything to see Amelia giving the Minister of Magic a dressing down he deserved.

After she was through with Fudge, he was much too terrified to not do anything she requested, and his office took on the duty of answering the public's mail. This was nasty work since the general public was sending Howlers. The plan for additional training was passed and none of the members of her department liked it when they saw the gleam in their Head's eye when she presented their new training schedule.

Naturally, Amelia was busy with work at the Ministry. Sirius had not much to do at the Wizengamot, so he spent most of his time dealing with the Black's businesses in his girlfriend's absence, much to his Oswald and Remus' amusement. He became the object of their teasing. None of them understood why the two weren't anxious to get married. After all, they weren't getting younger and their relationship had stabilised. Sirius artfully dodged the issue whenever it was brought up.

Hermione took Harry out for a haircut a few days later since she could no longer stand the sight of his long and scruffy hair. It was very amusing for Hermione to watch the stylist battle with his stubborn hair. He finally gave Harry a style that was short on the sides but long enough on the top to keep his grungy edge. It showcased his naturally wild hair but reduced the mop due to the short sides. Hermione nodded appreciatively when the hair stylist was finally through with his work. His lightening shape scar was fully exposed but Harry didn't mind - he was quite tired of people flicking his fringe aside so that they could see the scar.

"It looks really wonderful on you," commented Hermione as she fingered his hair lovingly.

Harry flashed a smile but turned to pay the hair stylist before leading Hermione out of the hair salon.

Dan stopped by for lunch at the Potter Mansion on the last weekday of their summer holidays.

"Harry, can I speak to you privately?" questioned Dan as he looked at Harry. He looked sombre and Harry complied with his request immediately, leading him to his study upstairs. As they quietly walked to his study, Harry couldn't help but worry about the reason Dan wanted to speak to him.

Was it something very important?

Harry led him into his large study. Dan silently took a seat at one of the armchairs near the fireplace and Harry mirrored his actions by sitting in the vacant armchair facing him.

There was a frown on his face as Dan looked at Harry.

"Jean wanted to be the one speaking to you but I managed to persuade her to allow me to do it instead. I'll cut the chase, Harry. I know that something is wrong even though none of you have said a word since the day of the World cup. You and your friends are preparing for a war, aren't you?"

Harry blinked in surprise as he picked his answer carefully.

"I won't say that we're preparing for a war, exactly. We're really preparing for battle in the event Voldemort appears at Hogwarts."

"And he will," Dan said definitively. He knew what kind of threat Lord Voldemort was from what he'd heard about the horrors from the first war.

"Yes," replied Harry honestly. Harry sighed inwardly at how perceptive he was; it was impossible to keep him out of the loop.

"What is he after?" Dan asked, knowing that he wouldn't like his answer.

"He's after me. I was the one who was responsible for his downfall when I was a baby. His pride couldn't accept it," explained Harry.

Dan nodded. "So you and Hermione are in danger?"

"Everyone has been doing all they can to keep us safe. However, it's really hard to protect us, so they are equipping us with the skills to defend ourselves."

His brows creased at his answer as he mulled over it. It was clear that he was calculating the odds.

"We won't cower in face of danger, especially since it would be a disaster for both the magical and the non-magical worlds if Voldemort managed to get his body back. There will be unexplained deaths in both places; unspeakable acts of terror against individuals, and once more Britain would sink into a dark time. This, Hermione and I cannot allow."

His tone softened, seeing the troubled expression on Dan's face.

"I'm sorry that I've dragged Hermione into the entire mess by being soul-bound to her. She now shares my fate. I can't push her aside in my attempt to protect her from everything."

"You're being silly, Harry," spoke Dan sharply.

Harry grew wide-eyed.

Dan started shifting uncomfortably. "It's hard for me to say this but I must say it. Even if Hermione weren't your soul mate, she wouldn't allow you to push her aside. She would have insisted to fight along with you. I thought you would have a measure of who she is by now – she'd do anything to protect you simply because she loves you."

Harry grew slightly sheepish at his accurate description of his wife.

"Besides, being soul-bound, gives you a reason to fight to stay alive. I realise that Lord Voldemort is a very powerful wizard and it seems

almost hopeless if you're fighting against him. After all, you've lost plenty of loved ones who stood in his way during the first war. Now, with your soul bond, you've got no choice but to make sure you survive so that both of you can live. I want you to do exactly that in the event you find yourself in danger. Even if she didn't share your fate, I would still want to see you alive. Do you hear me, Harry?" Dan spoke passionately.

All Harry could do was to nod his head since he was too emotional to speak.

Clearing his voice, he said in a quiet but firm tone.

"I won't let anything happen to us, I promise."

Dan flashed a smile as he relaxed into his seat.

There was silence in the room as they were engrossed with their own thoughts.

"Harry?" began Dan as he scratched the back of his head nervously. "I need to talk to you about something else."

"Yes, Dad?"

Dan took a deep breath before he spoke, "You remember the conversation we had in the restaurant after your wedding? It's been more than a year since then and you said you planned to consummate your marriage a year later."

Harry had a sinking feeling in his stomach that he was in for something really embarrassing.

"Well, I said we wanted to wait until we're both ready." Harry answered awkwardly as he turned red.

He continued as if he had never heard Harry. "So I want to talk to you about the birds and the bees."

Harry paled immediately. Oh shite!

Dan took them out for a dinner the next day, as if he was trying to make up for the embarrassing session they had the previous afternoon. Their ears were burning when Dan was finally through with Harry. The Grangers and the Potters did enjoy themselves at a wonderful restaurant. The rest of his friends returned home that morning so that they could spend the last few days before their summer holidays ended with their respective families.

There was an end-of-holidays gloom in the air when Harry woke up to get ready for his usual run. He moved around sluggishly, unable to believe that his summer holidays had finally come to an end. It was unusually short compared to his previous summers.

Hermione and Harry went on their run, taking the time to savour their last moments in the beautiful gardens of the Potter Mansion. There was so much happening around them that it was impossible to say for certain if they would return to the mansion again the next summer. However, the couple decided to make the best of their day instead of dwelling on unhappy thoughts.

There was the absence of mayhem that he usually associated to the end of summer since Hermione put her foot down and insisted that they had to pack in advance. Things were much easier when Hermione prepared a list of things he had to bring and he packed accordingly.

There was an air of restless when they ate their breakfast in a rather empty dining room. They were used to having their friends and family surrounding them whenever they had their meals. The dreary weather was also getting them down.

They arrived to the King's Cross Station without any hassles since the Grangers had driven them there. The conversation in the car was sparse since most of them were occupied with thoughts about the upcoming school term.

Rain was pouring in buckets by the time they made it onto Platform Nine and three quarters. They went through the barrier easily since they were only carrying Hedwig and Crookshanks.

The Hogwarts Express, a gleaming scarlet steam engine, was already there, clouds of steam billowing from it, which made many Hogwarts students and parents on the platform appear like dark ghosts. They climbed on the train to find seats, stowing their caged pets in the compartment halfway down the train. They then hopped back down onto the platform to say their goodbyes.

Jean engulfed them in a tight embrace, betraying the bottled-up worry she'd been keeping from them.

"We'll be fine, Mum. We'll see you soon," promised Hermione as she returned the hug.

"Yeah, we'll keep safe," assured Harry. Dan nodded and patted his shoulder.

"Remember to call often." Jean reminded as she released them reluctantly. They were soon joined by all their friends and their baggage. Their friends headed into the train to stow away their trunks before joining them at the platform. Amelia, Sirius, Remus, Oswald, and Felicia took their turns hugging all of them and exchanging goodbyes. The whistle blew and the teenagers boarded the train. There was the final billowing of smoke and the pistons hissed loudly and the train began to move. They said their final goodbyes through the window as the train began to pick up speed. Soon, the Grangers, Greengrasses, Remus, Sirius, and Amelia sped away from them.

The teenagers settled into their compartment. Cedric did the honours of expanding the space so that it could hold everyone.

The thick rain splattering the windows made it very difficult to see outside the train.

"Why did your father call you home?" Harry asked once they had all settled down.

Everyone looked inquisitively at Cedric, patiently waiting for his answer. It was clear that Daphne was the most curious to know.

"Something happened to the Chang family and as a result, Cho has to live with us. My parents were made her guardians in the event anything happened to her parents," began Cedric uneasily as he scratched the back of his neck. "We buried her parents recently in a quiet funeral and she's quite a wreck. My dad thought it was better that I stay at home to keep her company."

Hermione frowned.

"So what happened to the Changs? Why weren't they able to use their wands to protect themselves?" questioned Hermione in bafflement.

"The Changs decided to go for a holiday and were unfortunately caught in an armed Muggle conflict. They died on the spot. Cho will inherit everything from her parents when she comes of age, but in the meanwhile, she has to live with my family. It's been a very trying time for her, so you'll be seeing Cho more often. Is that alright with all of you?" Cedric asked.

"If Daph and Luna are okay with it, then I'm okay with it." Susan said flatly. There was pity in her eyes. Astoria heartily agreed with her.

"I'm fine with her," answered Luna. She understood the pain of losing a parent and would do all she could to help console Cho. The rest of the occupants saw no problems in allowing her to join them occasionally.

Cedric turned and looked at Daphne expectantly.

"I'll understand if you don't want her around," Cedric began as he held her hand, hoping to remove some of the pressure in making the decision.

Daphne smiled and answered, "Don't be silly, I'm not that insecure about our relationship. I trust you. I don't see anything wrong with having her around. I know she needs someone to be there for her."

The smile on Cedric's face grew. "Thank you, sweetheart."

The rest of the journey was spent discussing on the various spells they had learned recently, updating Cedric on all the lessons that he had missed at the Potter Mansion. The new DADA professor would take over for Remus and give them private lessons under the instructions of Professor McGonagall. They were all looking forward to taking lessons from the best Auror the Ministry had ever had.

Hogwarts Express slowed down at last, and finally stopped in the pitch-darkness of Hogsmeade station. As the train doors opened, there was a rumble of thunder overhead. Lightening fractured the gloom. Hermione and Daphne bundled Crookshanks and Katrina up their cloaks. With heads bent and eyes narrowed against the downpour, they hurried out of the train. The rain was now coming down so thick and fast - it was as though buckets of ice-cold water were being emptied repeatedly over their heads. The onslaught of the storm continued mercilessly.

They cast warming spells and water-repellent spells on themselves and slowly inched slowly along the dark platform with the rest of the crowd. A hundred horseless carriages stood waiting for them outside the station. Harry, Hermione, Neville, and Luna climbed gratefully into one of them; the door shut with a snap, and a few moments later, with a great lurch, the long procession of carriages was rumbling and splashing its way up the track towards Hogwarts Castle.

Their new term at Hogwarts was about to begin.

A/N: Thanks for all the reviews. This is my take on the night of the Quidditch Cup. I couldn't comprehend why the Ministry workers did not choose to apparate to a place closer to the masked group instead of fighting against the crowd when they were apparating in the campsite, as described in the canon. I did my modifications. I know many of you are expecting Harry and Hermione to fight with them but it's too early.

By the way, I'll be taking a week off writing. Have a great week.

Chapter 28

Beta-read by Frustr8dwriter

Through the metal gates flanked with winged boars and up the sweeping drive, the line of carriages rattled, swaying treacherously in what was fast becoming a gale. The huge castle of Hogwarts was looming nearer; its many lighted windows blurred and gleaming behind the downpour.

The horseless carriages stopped right before the imposing flight of stone steps.

The four teenagers quickly got out and hurried up the flight into the vast, torch-lit Entrance Hall, with its magnificent marble staircase. After warming themselves up with a spell, they dried themselves up with another spell that they had grown very familiar with due to their frequent mass water fights. Cedric, Daphne, Astoria, Fred, George, and Susan soon joined the four of them and they used the same incantations to dry and warm themselves. Another girl and her friends also joined them.

Harry could see that there was something very different about Cho.

"What's wrong?" questioned Hermione as she placed her hand on his chest. "You've been staring at her for a while."

"Well, Cho's definitely not the same as she used to be," said Harry hesitantly, draw his hand through his hair, and searching for the words to describe the change he'd observed.

Interested, Hermione turned to get a good look at her.

Cedric was hovering over Cho protectively as she obediently allowed him to fuss over her. She looked thinner, her skin pale, almost ghostly. Marietta Edgecombe seemed to be at a loss on how to deal with her. He dried her up with the spell and gently led her towards the group. Luna was also lingering around her, with a knowing and sad look on her face.

Luna understands, Harry reflected. They had never asked Luna about her mother but it was clear that she must have passed away when Luna was old enough to understand and feel the loss.

"She's grieving. It'll take time." Hermione answered with sympathy in her voice.

After they had all gathered together, they headed across the foyer and through double doors of the Great Hall.

The Great Hall looked its usual impressive self, decorated for the start-of-the-term feast. Hundreds of candles floated above the tables in mid-air, lighting up the cavernous hall. The four long house tables were already packed with chattering students and at front of the Hall, the staff sat along one side of the fifth table, facing the students. Harry's spirits lifted when he saw Hagrid sitting among the teachers, softly conversing with Professor Vector, their newly appointed Head of House. Harry and his friends split ways to sit at their respective House tables. Cedric took his surrogate brother duties to heart and escorted Cho to the Ravenclaw table.

Most of the Ravenclaws regarded them curiously since the news of her parents' death was not yet common knowledge. Luna planted herself firmly beside Cho at the table, silently promising Cedric that she would look after her in his stead, giving Cedric the assurance he needed.

After ranking first in her year thus bringing glory to her house, Luna found that her housemates were more accepting of her. Ravenclaws prized intelligence above all.

The fourth-year Gryffindors excitedly greeted Harry, Hermione, and Neville when they finally joined them at the table. They were chatting amongst themselves, waiting for the sorting ceremony to begin. The girls squealed in excitement when they realized that Harry wasn't wearing his trademark glasses. They eagerly complimented his new look, causing Harry to redden in embarrassment, much to the amusement of all their housemates.

"Thank you," said Harry with a hint of uncertainty as he tugged at his collar. Turning to Hermione, he realised that she was just as amused as the rest of his friends.

"I didn't think you'd blush this much when someone else commented how beautiful your eyes are," whispered Hermione as she leaned nearer to him. "I've always known that. And as I've told you many times before, not having your specs really brings out your eyes. Not to mention the fact that you look adorable when you blush, love."

"I don't know about the 'adorable' part. That word conjures up images of irresistible, giggly babies with chubby red cheeks and sparkling eyes." Harry declared as he frowned slightly. "It's really a misnomer."

Her eyes gleamed with mirth as she chuckled. "All right, Harry, my manly man. You look simply dashing," said Hermione patronisingly as she looked at him keenly.

"Gee, thanks," said Harry sardonically.

"You're welcome." Hermione offered a smile so sweet that it made the corners of his lips quiver.

The Weasley twins left to sit with their sixth-year friends. George immediately took a seat near Angelina so that they could speak privately. Fred, on the other hand, was talking to Lee Jordan, their partner in pranks, excitedly. Harry had no doubt that Fred was telling him all about the additions to their inventory they had created over the summer.

As Dean and Seamus took turns telling an interested Neville all about their holidays, Harry took the opportunity to look around.

I wonder what the new Professor looks like? Harry pondered as he searched the staff table. He saw only familiar faces. "Where's Professor Moody?" Harry asked aloud to no one in particular.

There was an empty seat between Professor McGonagall and Professor Sprout, the Herbology teacher. Harry guessed that it must have been Professor Flitwick's place. She was talking to Professor

Sinistra, the Astronomy teacher. On Professor Sinistra's other side was the Potion master, Professor Snape and he was looking as sour as before. There was an empty seat at the end of the table, beside Professor Snape. Professor Dumbledore sat next to Professor McGonagall, his sweeping silver hair and beard gleaming in the candlelight. He was staring at the ceiling, lost in thought. He had been keeping his word, acting no more than his capacity as a Transfiguration teacher to him and his friends.

Honestly, at the end of the last term, Transfiguration was fast becoming one of his favourite lessons because of the interesting yet effective way Dumbledore taught. Not that Professor McGonagall was a bad teacher, but her lessons could definitely never have been described as fun. In fact, Harry was certain that Professor McGonagall would be insulted if her students ever remarked that they were.

Harry also looked up at the ceiling and marvelled at its beauty. It was enchanted to look like the sky outside, and he had never seen it look this stormy. Black and purple clouds were swirling across it, and as another thunderclap sounded outside, a fork of lightening fractured the gloom.

Hermione, who'd heard Harry's question was intrigued, scanned the table a bit more closely.

"He's probably not here yet," answered Hermione as she looked up. "It's beautiful, isn't it? The ceiling still fascinates me even after four years."

Harry smiled and looked at her, "Yes it is. Whenever I see this ceiling, it reminds me of the first time you entered the Great Hall – the words you said and the awe on your face."

Hermione raised her brows in surprise. "What did I say?"

"It's bewitched to look like the sky outside. I read about it in Hogwarts: A History." Harry replied in his best Hermione imitation.

She laughed and swatted his arm but he could see adoration in her eyes. Before she could speak, the sound of the doors being thrown aside had their attention. The tiny Professor Flitwick, accompanied by a long line of first years, entered the Great Hall, soaked to the bone. The new students looked as if they had been swimming instead of sailing across the Black lake.

The Great Hall hushed immediately as Professor Flitwick placed the ratty old wizard hat on the three-legged stool.

The Sorting Hat looked exactly as he had remembered - old, dirty, and patched.

The tear near the brim opened wide like a mouth and broke into a song.

The Great Hall burst into applause when the Sorting Hat was finished. The sorting ceremony began immediately, with Professor Flitwick reading out the long list of names with his squeaky voice.

After the sorting was over, Professor McGonagall stood up to greet the students. In her usual stern voice, she asked them to tuck in.

The golden trays before them became magically filled with food. Harry, as usual, helped Hermione load her plate. Their friends couldn't help teasing the couple since they hadn't seen them over the summer holidays.

"Merlin's beard, it's been more than a year and I can't believe that you two are still going strong," commented Dean in amusement. "Harry, you're making us guys look bad. My future girlfriend is going to expect me to attend to her because Lord Gryffindor does."

Harry shrugged nonchalantly. "I know Hermione doesn't need me to serve her, but I want to do something for her anyway."

"You're still seriously whipped, Harry," remarked Seamus, shaking his head.

The two fourth-year Gryffindors continued to tease him. Hermione ignored them as she read and ate. However, Harry could sense that she was still listening into the conversation and repressing her laughter.

Their conversation soon turned to the highlights of the Quidditch World Cup when they realised that Harry was not at all bothered by their ribbing. Dean and Seamus were in awe that Harry, Hermione, and Neville had the top box tickets. Soon, Ginny joined in, perking up at the mention of the Quidditch World Cup. As usual, they were full of praise for Viktor Krum, the most exhilarating player in the final match. For once, everyone saw Hermione set her book down to talk about Quidditch. Hermione shared some of the highlights of the match when Krum displayed his spectacular abilities on the broom and his bravery, wringing a raised brow from everyone at the table.

"It looks like Hermione has her sights on someone else," joked Dean as he clapped Harry on the back. "You better work harder, Harry. Krum offers plenty of competition in love and on the pitch."

The rain was drumming heavily against the dark, high windows. Another clap of thunder shook the windows and the stormy ceiling flashed, illuminating the golden plates as the remains of the first course vanished and was replaced instantly with a large variety of puddings.

Hermione watched with amusement that Harry loaded his plate mostly with Treacle tarts after filling her plate with her favourites.

The puddings soon disappeared from the plates and Professor McGonagall stood up to address the students in her first welcoming speech. The Hall fell into silence immediately. As usual, Professor McGonagall went right to the point.

"Welcome to another term at Hogwarts. I have a few announcements to share with you. First, we would like to welcome back Professor Hagrid. He has completed his studies and will be teaching Care of Magical Creatures."

Hagrid stood up and the students applauded loudly. They were happy to have him back as a teacher. When Hagrid sat down and the clapping has ceased, Professor McGonagall continued, "Mr. Filch, the caretaker, has asked me to inform you that the list of objects forbidden in this castle has increased to include Screaming Yo-yos, Fanged Frisbees, and Ever Bashing Boomerangs. Next, the forest on the grounds is out-of-bounds to all students, as is the village of Hogsmeade to all below third year. Finally, there will be no inter-house Quidditch Cup this year."

There were sounds of groaning at the announcement. Most of the students were looking forward to another season of Quidditch at Hogwarts after watching the Quidditch World Cup finals.

Professor McGonagall continued, as if she wasn't interrupted. "This is because Hogwarts will be hosting an event that will start a week from now and continuing until February."

At that moment, there was deafening rumble of thunder, and the doors of the Great Hall banged open. A man stood in the doorway, leaning upon a long staff, shrouded by a black travelling cloak. Every head in the Great Hall swivelled towards the stranger, suddenly brilliantly illuminated by a fork of lightening that bolted across the ceiling. He lowered his hood and shook out a long mane of grizzled, dark grey hair, then began to walk up to the teacher's table.

A dull clank echoed through the Hall on every other step. He reached the end of the table, turned right and limped towards Professor McGonagall. They spoke for a brief moment.

Another flash of lightning crossed the ceiling. Hermione gasped.

The lightning threw the man's face into a sharp relief, and it was a face unlike anyone had ever seen. It looked as though someone who had only the vaguest idea of what human faces were supposed to look like, and was none too skilled with a chisel had carved it out of weathered wood. Every inch of his skin seemed to be scarred. The mouth looked like a diagonal gash. However, it was the eyes that were the most frightening. He had a magical eye of electrical blue,

which moved independently from the other normal beady black eye, rolling up and down, side to side without blinking.

Professor McGonagall gestured him to an empty seat on the right.

"I think that must Professor Moody. He's the image of a veteran who has fought and survived many wars." Hermione commented.

"Please put your hands together to welcome your new Defence against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Alastor Moody." Professor McGonagall announced as she clapped enthusiastically.

Her applause rang eerily across the hall. It took a while for her statement to register and the students started clapping reluctantly. Many of them were still transfixed with their new Professor's strange appearance.

He seemed to be oblivious to the less than warm welcome, taking a swing from his hip flask. His magical eye continued to zoom around its socket uncontrollably, making them uncomfortable.

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat loudly.

"Now, as I was saying. Hogwarts will be hosting the Tri-wizard Tournament. The Tri-wizard Tournament was first established some seven hundred years ago, as a friendly competition between the three largest European schools of wizardry - Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang. A champion was selected to represent each school, and the three champions had to compete in three magical tasks. The schools took turns hosting the Tournament, which occurred once every five years. This was generally agreed to as an excellent way of establishing ties between young witches and wizards of different nationalities until the death toll mounted so high that it was discontinued several centuries ago."

Many of the students began to whisper excitedly among themselves.

"Our own Department of Magical Co-operation and Magical Games and Sports have decided that the time was ripe for another attempt. The tasks have been redesigned so that none of the champions will

find themselves in mortal danger. The Heads of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving shortly with their students, and the selection of the champions will be done this Friday. An impartial judge will decide which students are the most worthy to compete for the Triwizard Cup, the glory of their school, and one thousand Galleons in personal prize money."

"I'm going for it," hissed George, his face lit up with excitement at the prospect of such honour and riches. However, he was not the only one envisioning himself as the Hogwarts Champion. At every table, he could see people whisper fervently to their neighbours.

He smiled. His thoughts were going in a different direction. Harry had enough on his plate and didn't need the attention or the prize money. He was more than willing to stand aside and watch others take the spotlight, to cheer for the future Hogwarts Champion and participate as an audience.

Professor McGonagall spoke again and the whole Hall hushed.

"The Heads of the schools participating, along with the Ministry of Magic, have agreed put an age restriction on the contenders this year. Only students who have come of age - that is to say, seventeen years or older would be allowed to put forward their names."

There were sounds of protest but they halted immediately when Professor McGonagall frowned slightly. "It is a measure necessary, given that the tasks will be difficult and dangerous, whatever precautions taken, it will be unlikely that any student below sixth and seventh year will be able to cope with them. We will ensure that no one will be able to hoodwink the impartial judge so I ask that you please don't waste time submitting your name unless you're seventeen."

"We'll think of something," said George as he rubbed his hands. "Would you want to go for it, Harry? You're of age since you're a Lord."

"She did say it was an issue of age and experience. I doubt being seen as an adult by the society would matter. I have no intention to join the competition at all," answered Harry.

"Oh." The Weasley twins understood the reason he wanted to keep a low profile. They turned away and began to put their heads together.

"Please do not in any manner embarrass Hogwarts in front of our guests. They will be staying with us for the greater part of the year, so remember to extend every courtesy to our foreign guests. Now, it's getting late. Please return to your dorms. Prefects, please remember to lead the first years to their dormitories." Professor McGonagall advised.

There was great scraping and banging as the students got to their feet and swarmed out of the Great Hall.

"We're turning seventeen in April. I can't believe we aren't allowed to participate," grumbled Fred to George as they followed the crowd moving out of the Great Hall.

"They're most certainly not stopping me from entering." George said stubbornly.

"I don't think you'd stand a chance even if you were seventeen," remarked Susan from behind when she caught up with them.

Fred scowled at her but Susan ignored him.

"Where are the rest?" asked Hermione as she looked around, searching for their friends in the sea of students. The Weasley twins started debating the deterrents Professor McGonagall could have used to stop those who are under seventeen.

Susan discreetly rolled her eyes, annoyed by the pomposity of the twins.

"They're probably behind us. Daph wanted me to remind you about Cedric's birthday." Susan began, turning to Hermione. "It's a big

birthday since he will be formally recognized as an adult and she's a little worried about it."

"She must be having issues with the planning. I really have a bad feeling about this. He's turning seventeen on Thursday, isn't he?" said Hermione.

"Yeah, so most of my housemates are encouraging him to participate in the tournament. He's giving the idea some thought," answered Susan. The Gryffindors were heading upstairs where the entrance to the Gryffindor tower was. "I'm headed this way. I'll see all of you in the morning at the Black Lake. I can't wait to start running again. I felt so strange when I was at home and I didn't go for my usual run."

Harry chuckled lightly. "Yes, we'll see you at the usual time at the tree by the lake."

They bade one another a good night before Susan and the Weasley twins went on their separate ways. Harry and Hermione waited for Luna near the double doors, away from the crowd that was streaming out. They were headed the same way since Luna had been living with them in their married quarters since last term.

The third-year Ravenclaw soon appeared, with Cedric and Cho. After bidding them good night, Cedric steered Cho toward the Ravenclaw tower. Together, Harry, Hermione and Luna moved towards the private sleeping quarters, discussing Cedric's upcoming birthday. Although Luna was more accepted in Ravenclaw, she enjoyed the privacy and the security of staying with Harry and Hermione.

The quarters remained untouched, much to their delight. A crackling fire was warming up the sitting room. Outside, rain continued to beat steadily against the windows. Occasionally, a flash of lightning would light up the dark sky outside. The three teenagers noticed that the house elves had made considerable effort in maintaining the place in prime condition.

Their pets were already sleeping when they arrived. Hedwig, perching on the large stand by the window, had hid her head with her large white wings. Lying quietly in the basket near the perch was

Crookshanks. Hermione tucked her pet into his basket before turning in. All of them went to bed immediately, totally knackered from the excitement of returning to school.

Lying on their bed, Harry lay on his back as he mused. Hermione lifted her head from his chest to look at him enquiringly. They had been too busy over the past week that they hadn't had a chance to give what happened after the Quidditch World Cup much consideration.

"I'm feeling guilty about keeping our involvement that night from Aunt Am." Harry explained, taking a lock of her brown hair and playing with it.

"It will be difficult to explain," replied Hermione hesitantly.

His brows drew into a line at her answer as he propped himself up. "She's family. You heard Sirius; she has been working so hard for these past few days, trying to track the Death Eaters."

Hermione kept her silence as she gave the matter some thought. Troubled, she said, "I don't know, Harry. You're right that she's family but I doubt our information would do much shedding light on the identities of the Death Eater. I don't like the risk we'll be taking. You don't know who might be privy to the information if Aunt Am has to record what happened for investigation purposes."

"Let me get what you're saying straight, my love. You don't want to share what happened that night with Aunt Am?" Harry reiterated.

"Yes, Harry."

It wasn't as if she didn't trust Aunt Am but they had to be careful with the information they were divulging. Anyone could connect the dots and realise that they were a soul-bonded couple if they discovered they could manipulate magical elements. After all, it was recorded in one of the books.

Harry seemed displeased with her answer.

"What if I insist?" Harry challenged.

A hush fell upon the room.

Hermione resisted the urge to argue and force him to see things in her way. After all, he could read her thoughts clearly as if it was his own, it would be pointless. She put up her mental shields, hurt by his lack of trust in her judgement.

Giving a sigh, she answered in a resigned tone, "Then you can tell her, Harry." Hermione turned away from him, willing herself to sleep.

He drew his hand through his hair in frustration. He didn't mean to take that kind of tone with her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so harsh. Love, I trust you implicitly," he assured. "I take your opinions seriously and you are right that telling could come with serious implications. But I think that I have to tell her because she's family and she needs all the information she can get. I'm willing to face the consequences of my actions. "

"Harry, many things could go wrong and it might be more than what we can handle. Riddle is on the rise and he is someone we can't take lightly." Hermione pointed out. "However, if you feel strongly about telling Aunt Am, know that I'll back your decision."

Harry took her hands and brushed his lips across her knuckles. "Thank you for being so understanding." Hermione snuggled up to him and she succumbed to sleep immediately. Harry grew contemplative, giving the matters much thought.

In the office of the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Amelia was still hard at work despite the late hour. Amelia had begun the investigation into that fateful night. She had personally examined all the memories from that night - extracting the important parts from hundreds of different sources. It took her this much time to complete the massive task. Her finished work lay before her, tracking the Death Eater's movement from their first appearance in the campsite. Rubbing her eyes tiredly, she looked at each picture

carefully. Her eyes widened when she held up a picture of the Death Eaters trying to put off flames off their bodies anxiously.

It didn't make sense.

The picture bothered her deeply. Someone anonymous was there, hidden in the woods, melting out justice that night. It was no coincidence that all of the Death Eaters were caught in the fire at the same time - someone must have set it on them. However, it did not look like a typical incantation. The fire just grew suddenly and burned them. She briefly considered bringing that memory to an Unspeakable and questioning them if they knew any magic like this. She stood up, about to leave when another picture caught her attention.

No, she was wrong. There wasn't only one invisible participant that night. There was at least two, she thought as she held up the photograph of the Dark Mark shining like a constellation in the sky. This was getting complex, she thought.

The weather cleared up overnight. Dressed in their tracksuits, the teenagers met at the Black lake for their usual run. Everyone, including the Weasley twins had turned up, albeit sleepy. Neville had expected them to oversleep since they were so obsessed with finding all means to join the Tri-wizard Tournament. They spent a longer time warming up their unusually stiff muscles before they jogged. The air was still cool due to the rain, making it very pleasant for them to run on the paths that encircled the Black Lake.

Harry and his company were astonished to see so many students lingering around the lake at such an early hour. Susan and Daphne laughed at their bafflement, but Susan took pity on them and explained the presence of the female students.

It turned out that it was a common knowledge among the girls that if they wanted an opportunity to ogle at the two hottest guys in Hogwarts without their heavy thick robes on, all they needed to do was to wake up at dawn and go to the Black Lake.

Cedric and Harry turned red slightly, averting their eyes as Susan teased them. Even though they were wearing tracksuits, it was thinner than their Hogwarts robes, revealing the faint outlines of their bodies. All the guys had been doing weight training during the summer holidays, so their muscles had definition.

"I'm wearing Dudley's old, big shirts tomorrow," replied Harry, feeling a bit self-conscious, much to everyone's amusement.

"You could always run in your robe, I think it'll discourage them from staring," suggested Luna.

There was some good-natured chortling.

Though he wasn't privy to much guy talk at Hogwarts with his new sleeping arrangements, he was certain that the male students were hanging out by the lake around dawn for the same reason – to watch the girls.

Ignoring the growing crowd, they relaxed under the lone tree by the lake when they were done, feeling the warmth of the rising sun on their skin. Cedric mentioned his willingness to join the competition. They heartily supported him since it was an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Reluctantly, they returned to their dormitories for a shower before their breakfast.

Cho was with Cedric when he appeared at the Great Hall for breakfast. He directed her towards the Gryffindor table where most of them were sitting and chatting. The rest Gryffindors were used to their presence, sporadically joining in when their conversation sparked their interest. They actively tried to include Cho into their conversations but it was clear that Cho wasn't in the mood to participate much. Since it was the first day, the Heads of the Houses handed out the new class schedules to their students. They began comparing class schedules and all of them realised that they had more Defence against Dark Arts lessons.

Harry and Hermione spoke to Professor Vector, their Head of Gryffindor, in private during breakfast, discussing their arrangements for the year. They agreed upon handing in NEWT standard essays in

every subject weekly and in exchange they would not need to do any fourth year homework.

Hermione immediately used her watch to update their personal timetable accordingly, secretly glad that there was no Quidditch to upset their schedule.

Harry and Hermione scanned the Monday column of their timetable and were glad to see that once again they were paired up with either the Hufflepuffs or the Slytherins for their subjects. They had Herbology with the Hufflepuffs, followed by Care for Magical Creatures with the Slytherins. Harry smiled - he was looking forward to seeing and speaking to Hagrid in person. He noticed that he wasn't in the Great Hall at breakfast.

Professor Sprout instructed them to collect Bubotubers pus by squeezing them out from shiny swellings upon plants that looked more like giant black slugs, protruding vertically out of the soil. Squeezing the pus was disgusting but oddly satisfying and the pus smelled strongly of petrol.

The booming bell echoed from the castle across the grounds and the class separated; the Hufflepuffs headed upstairs for Transfiguration while the Gryffindors headed in the opposite direction, down the slopes to Hagrid's cabin, which stood at the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

Hagrid had requested to stay in the wooden cabin, since it had been his home for half a century. He was standing outside the cabin, waiting patiently for them.

"Good morning, Professor Hagrid," greeted Harry, Hermione and Neville with smiles on their faces.

A large smile soon appeared on his face.

"Mornin'!" returned Hagrid, grinning at them. "Have a special trea' for yah guys. Need ter wait for Slytherins."

Harry and Hermione exchanged looks. Hagrid's definition of a 'treat' was much different from theirs. After all, he found Fluffy, the three-headed dog, cute. The Slytherins soon appeared and Daphne congratulated him on his promotion to a full-fledged professor. Hagrid thanked her profusely.

He summoned the class register and took attendance.

"Follow me," he beckoned when he was done, leading them towards the Forbidden Forest. There, in the pens, were golden unicorn foals. The girls squealed excitedly at the sight of them. The young unicorns were beautiful. Hagrid wisely lectured the class about the unicorns as he allowed the class to approach and handle them.

Hagrid chatted with them a bit while the class was occupied with the foals and it was clear from his eyes that he was enjoying every minute of his new job. They were given an assignment on Unicorn foals after the lesson was completed.

Harry and Hermione had Arithmancy after lunch. Professor Vector spent most of the time discussing about their holiday assignment after they'd turned in the work. Daphne was in the class with them, much to their delight.

When their afternoon classes were over, they were done with their lessons for the day.

Harry and Hermione decided to spend their spare time in their quarters, reading. It was the first day back school and both of them wanted to take it slow.

"Mione," he said, setting down his book, "I've given the matter much consideration and decided not to tell Aunt Am. You're right. Riddle isn't a person we can underestimate and it's best we keep such information to ourselves."

"It's most prudent at this moment," answered Hermione. "Aunt Am will understand."

"I know she'll but I hate keeping things from her."

During the first few days of lessons, the professors gave introductory speeches outlining their expectations of them for the year. The teachers paid more attention on their holiday assignments and revision of third year work since it was their first week back in school. They did, however, emphasize that all fourth students should expect a greater workload in preparation for Ordinary Wizarding Examinations they would take the next year. It was apparent to the professors that the students needed more practice to get up to standard. This news was naturally greeted with groans in most classes.

The Daily Prophet featured nothing but articles that smeared the Ministry during that first week. Naturally, Rita Skeeter wrote the worst of the lot. Harry had to agree that the Ministry, under the leadership of Fudge, was definitely lacking – to put it mildly.

The students could talk nothing but the upcoming Tri-wizard Tournament. Rumours were flying from one student to another like an epidemic flu: who was going to try for Hogwarts Champion and how the students from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons differed from themselves.

Harry noticed that the castle seemed to be undergoing an extra-thorough cleaning. Several grimy portraits had been scrubbed, much to the displeasure of their subjects, who sat huddled in the frames, wincing, and touching their raw pink faces. The suits of armour were suddenly gleaming and moving without squeaking, and Filch, the caretaker, was behaving so ferociously to any student who forgot to wipe their shoes before entering the castle that he terrified a pair of first-year girls to hysterics.

In the midst of the uproar about the upcoming competition, the students grew curious about their new Professor. By the end of the second day, everyone seemed to have heard that Professor Moody's lessons were very thrilling. The group only met during dinner since it was the only common mealtime they had all day. Cedric and the Weasley twins, like the rest of the students who had already attended his class, were very excited about the new Professor.

"The lesson was simply wicked," commented Fred eagerly as he leapt into the empty seat beside Susan.

"Yeah, he really knows his stuff. You know he has been through it all and has done it all." George added, climbing into the other empty seat. Their faces had lit up with enthusiasm.

"The lesson was absolutely amazing," agreed Cedric as he nodded his head.

It sparked off an interest in those who hadn't his lessons yet.

The fourth-year Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs wouldn't have his class until Thursday.

"What did he go over during the first lesson?" asked Hermione. Their entire group was already way ahead in common hexes and their counter-jinxes and had touched on offensive spells. She couldn't fathom what could've made the twins this excited.

With an evil smirk on his face, Fred answered, "I'm not telling. We'd be spoiling the surprise."

Fred had to duck the flying missiles tossed in his direction. The constant duelling had sharpened his reflexes and his sense of awareness considerably, and he nimbly ducked all of them. He didn't expect his friends to summoned them back immediately with the good old summoning spell, so some of the missiles did hit him on the back of his head.

"The convenience of Hermione's Christmas present," grumbled Fred as he rubbed a particularly sore spot at the back of his head.

"And Lupin's training," added Susan with a smile. "Lupin would be so upset with you if he found out that you were so easily assaulted. After all, all we did was to use the summoning spell."

"You should really work on your general awareness. You shouldn't let your guard down even though you're in school. You need more training," instructed Harry in faux-seriousness.

"Perhaps, we should all consider attacking him occasionally." Daphne suggested thoughtfully.

"That's a brilliant suggestion. We should put our all in these attacks," answered Susan, her eyes gleaming with mischief.

"I'm still not telling," replied Fred grimly, getting a bit nervous. With additional training over the summer holidays, they were quite proficient in attacking. It would be difficult to handle them if any of them sprung a surprise on him by attacking all at once, holding nothing back.

"We're not trying to get you to talk, we're merely acting with your welfare at heart," answered Neville, flashing a smile. "Look on the bright side, it will be like killing two birds with a stone, we could work on our sneak attacks as well."

"Now, that's really slapping it in a bit too thick." Fred complained. "You're all kidding, right?"

There was silence at the table.

To his horror, everyone, with straight faces, shook their heads.

"Of course not, as Nev pointed out. It would be beneficial for everyone." Cedric said reasonably.

Fred blanched.

None of them had the chance to carry out their promise to Fred since he was on high alert all the time for the next three days. George tested his defences by attacking him physically before they headed to bed that night. To George's disappointment, Fred managed to parry his blows despite being slow in reacting. However, after that surprise attack, Fred didn't sleep the rest of the night, afraid that any of them might choose to attack him while he was still sleeping, much to the amusement of the rest of the group.

True to his word, Fred did not share with them the contents of Professor Moody class. He thought he was taking a stand, but much to his chagrin, George and Cedric had no issues divulging what they'd learned.

When they went down to breakfast on Thursday morning, they found that the Great Hall had been decorated overnight. Gigantic silk banners hung from the walls, each of them representing a Hogwarts house - red with a gold lion for the Gryffindor, blue with a bronze eagle for Ravenclaw, yellow with a black badger for Hufflepuff, and green with a silver serpent for Slytherin. Behind the teacher's table, the largest banner of all bore the Hogwarts coat of arms; lion, eagle, badger and snake united around a large letter "H".

The fourth year Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs were looking forward to their first lesson with Professor Moody after lunch that day. They were queuing outside his classroom before the bell had even rung.

Harry, Hermione, Neville, and Susan hurried into the four seats in front of the teacher's desk and took out their copies of the text, and waited quietly. Soon they heard Moody's distinctive clunking footsteps coming down the corridor and he entered the room, looking as strange and frightening as ever. They could see his clawed, wooden foot protruding from underneath his robes.

"You can put those away," growled Moody, stumping over to his desk and sitting down, "You won't be needing them.

There were sounds of rustling as they returned the books back into their bags.

Moody took out the register, shook out his long mane of grizzled grey hair out of his twisted and scarred face and began calling out names, his normal eye moving steadily down the list while his magical eye swivelled around, fixing upon each student as he or she answered.

"Right, I've got a letter from Professor Lupin about this class. Seems you've had a thorough grounding in tackling Dark creatures. But you're behind - very behind – on dealing with curses," said Moody.

"I'm here to bring you up to scratch on what wizards can do to each other. I've only one year to teach you how to deal with Dark-"

"What? Aren't you staying?" blurted Ron from the second row.

Moody's magical eye spun around to stare at the speaker. There was a pregnant silence in the classroom. However, after a moment, Moody smiled and it was the first time Harry had seen him do so.

"You'd be Arthur Weasley's son, eh?" Moody said. "Your father helped me out of a very tight corner a few days ago...yeah, I'm staying just the one year. One year and back to retirement."

He gave a harsh laugh, and then clapped his snarled hands together.

"So straight into curses. They come in many strengths and forms. According to the Ministry of Magic, I'm supposed to teach you counter curses and stop at that. I'm not supposed to show you what illegal Dark curses look like until you're in the sixth year. However, I say, the sooner you know what you're up against, the better. How are you supposed to defend yourself against something you've never seen? A wizard who's about to put an illegal curse on you isn't going to tell you what he's about to do. He's not going to do it nice and polite to your face. You need to be prepared. You need to be alert and watchful. So ... do you know which curses are most heavily punished by law?"

Several hands raised tentatively into the air. He pointed on Ron.

"Er, my dad told me about one... is it called the Imperius curse or something?"

"Ah, yes," said Moody appreciatively. "Your father would know that one. It gave the Ministry lots of trouble at one time, the Imperius curse."

He withdrew a glass jar from his drawer. Three large spiders were scuttling inside it. Moody reached into the jar, caught one of the spiders and held it in his palm for all to see. He pointed his wand at it and muttered, "Imperio!"

The spider leapt from Moody's hand on a fine thread of silk and began to swing backwards and forwards as though on a trapeze. It stretched out its legs rigidly and did a black flip, breaking the thread and landing on the desk where it rose onto two of its hind legs and did a tap dance.

"Total control. I could make it do anything. Years back, there were a lot of witches and wizards being controlled by the Imperius curse. It was a tough job for the Ministry to try to sort out who was being forced to act and who was acting out of free will. The Imperius curse can be fought and I'll be teaching you how, but it takes real strength of character, and not everyone's got it. Better avoid being hit with it if you can. CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" He barked, and everyone jumped.

Moody picked up the spider and tossed it into the jar.

"Who knows another one?"

Several hands lifted into the air.

"Yes?" said Moody, his magical eyes rolling right over to fix on Neville.

"The Cruciatus curse." Neville answered, swallowing visibly.

"Your name's Longbottom?" asked Moody, his magical eye swooping down to check the register again. Neville nodded but Moody made no further enquires. He reached into the jar for the spider and placed it upon the desktop, where it remained motionless, apparently too scared to move.

"The Cruciatus curse," said Moody. "Needs to be a bit bigger for you to get the idea," he said pointing his wand on the spider. "Engorgio!"

The spider grew. Its size was now an eighth of the desk.

Moody raised his wand again, pointed it at the spider and muttered, "Crucio!"

At once, the spider's legs bent in upon its body; it rolled over and began to twitch horribly, rocking for side to side. It would be screaming in pain if it had voice. Moody did not remove his wand and it continued to shudder and jerk even more violently.

"Stop it!" said Hermione shrilly.

She wasn't looking at the spider but Neville. His hands were clenched upon the desk in front of him, his knuckles were white, and he looked pale.

Moody raised his wand but the spider continued to twitch as if an electrical wave was still passing through it.

"Reducio," Moody murmured, and the spider shrank back to its proper size. He put it into the jar where the spider continued to shudder from the after effects of the spell.

"Pain," Moody began softly, "You don't need thumbscrews or knives to torture someone if you can perform the Cruciatus curse. It was very popular once, too."

"Are there any more spells that you know?"

Everyone seemed to be looking around, wondering about the fate of the last spider.

Hermione raised her hand into the air for the third time.

"Yes?" Moody asked, looking at her.

"Avada Kedavra" Hermione answered.

Many people looked uneasily around at her.

"Ah," said Moody. "The last and the worst. Avada Kedavra... the killing curse."

He put his hand into the jar, and almost as though it knew it was coming, the third spider scuttled frantically around the bottom of the glass jar, trying to avoid Moody's fingers, but he trapped it and placed it on the top of the desk. It started to scamper anxiously across the desk.

Moody raised his wand and Harry felt a thrill of foreboding.

"Avada Kedavra!" Moody roared.

There was a flash of blinding green light and a rushing sound, as though a vast, invisible something was soaring through the air— instantaneously the spider rolled over onto its back, dead. Several girls stifled cries.

Moody swept the spider off the desk onto the floor casually.

"Not nice," said Moody calmly. "Not pleasant and there is no counter curse. There is no blocking it. Only one known person has ever survived it and he's sitting in front of me."

He shifted uncomfortably when he felt both of Moody's eyes looking into his own.

He remembered the blinding green light. So that was exactly how his parents were killed, unblemished and unmarked. He recalled the details from that night clearly.

Why didn't the curse work on him since it worked on both of his parents? Why was the spell reflected, destroying Voldemort's physical body that night?

Moody was speaking again and Harry willed himself to listen to what the professor was saying.

"Avada Kedavra's a curse that needs a powerful bit of magic behind it - you all could get out your wands now and point them at me and say the words, and I doubt I'd get so much as a nose-bleed. But it doesn't matter; I'm not here to teach you how to do it. Now if there are no counter-curses, why am I showing you effects of the curse? Because

you've got to know. You've got to appreciate what the worst is. You don't want to find yourself in a situation where you have to face this curse. CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" He roared, and the whole class jumped again.

They spent the rest of the lessons taking notes on each of the Unforgiveable Curses. No one spoke until the bell rang half an hour later. After Moody had dismissed them and they were out of the classroom, torrents of talk burst forth.

Neville was still a bit pale from the lessons. Susan and Hermione worriedly looked at him, unsure of what to do.

"The guests will be arriving at six. We really need to head back to our dormitory to put away our bags and books." Susan said, looking at her watch.

"It's best you hurry, Sue. It's a long walk to your dorm," advised Harry. She cast a concerned look in Neville's direction before placing her hand on his arm gently. "I'll see you later, Nev."

He returned a weak smile before she hurried off with the rest of her housemates.

The walk back to the Gryffindor dormitory was unusually quiet. Harry and Hermione walked Neville to the common room before heading to their own quarters. After they all dropped off their bags in their respective rooms, they hurried to the Entrance Hall. There, the Heads of houses were ordering their students into lines. They straightened their hats and ties as they joined the queue. Professor Vector was organising them according to their year. They followed her lead and filed down the front steps and lined up in front of the castle. It was a clear cool evening.

Soon the sky was darkening, yet there were still no signs of their guests.

"How do you think they will be arriving?" asked Harry as he stared down the drive which led to the front gates. "By train?"

"I doubt it." Hermione answered. "I think it'll be in some flashy way."

They scanned the grounds excitedly, but nothing was moving; everything was still, silent like usual. Harry was getting slightly impatient, waiting out here. He could think of better things to do - like mediating on the grounds.

And then Dumbledore called out from the back row where he stood with the other teachers - "Aha! Unless I'm very much mistaken, the delegation from Beauxbatons approaches!"

"Where?" many students called eagerly as they searched the grounds.

"There!" One of them called, pointing over the Forest. Something larger than a broomstick was hurling across the deep dark sky towards the castle. It was getting bigger as it approached. They saw a gigantic, powder blue, horse-drawn carriage, all palominos, and each the size of an elephant. The front three rows of students drew backwards as the carriage hurtled ever lower, coming in to land at tremendous speed - then with an almighty crash, the horses' hooves, larger than dinner plates hit the ground. A second later, the carriage landed too, bouncing upon its vast wheels, while the golden horses tossed their large, proud heads and rolled large fiery eyes.

Harry could see that these horses were quite extraordinary.

Yet, the horses were nothing compared to the woman who had regally exited the first carriage. She was large - probably about the same size as Hagrid. This woman was standing at the foot of the steps, looking around at the wide-eyed crowd. She had an olive-skinned face, large black liquid eyes and a beaky nose. Her hair was drawn back in a shining knot at the base of her neck. She was dressed from head to toe in black satin, and many opals gleamed at her throat and on her thick fingers.

McGonagall started to clap; the students, following her lead, broke into applause too.

Her face relaxed into a gracious smile and she walked towards McGonagall.

"Welcome to Hogwarts, Madam Maxime," McGonagall greeted with a smile.

"Headmistress McGonagall," Madame Maxime began in a deep voice, "I hope to find you well?"

"In excellent form, thank you," McGonagall replied.

"My pupils," said Madame Maxime, waving one of her enormous hands carelessly behind her.

There were a dozen of boys and girls, all, by the look of them, in their late teens - had emerged from the carriage and were now standing behind her. Their robes were made of fine silk and none of them were wearing cloaks.

"as Karkaroff arrived yet?" Madame Maxime asked.

As if to answer, in a distance, they heard an eerie sound from a distance: a muffled rumbling and sucking sound, as though an immense vacuum cleaner was moving along the riverbed. They had a clear view of the Black lake and some disturbance were taking place in the centre of the lake, sending large round waves to the sides of the lake, flooding the muddy banks. In the middle, a huge whirlpool appeared and a large ship rose magnificently out of the water, gleaming. It had a strangely skeletal look about it, as though it was a resurrected wreck, and the dim misty lights shimmering at its portholes that looked quite ghostly. It reminded him of Norse ships. The ship glided towards the bank. They heard the splash of an anchor being thrown out into the shallow water.

"He's here now. Would you like to head inside first? "

"Yes," said Madame Maxime, looking at her students. "But ze 'orses-"

"Our Care for Magical Creatures Professor will be up to the task. Meet Professor Rubeus Hagrid." McGonagall introduced. Hagrid came forward, bowing slightly.

She seemed amazed at his size for a moment. "Nice to meet you 'Agrid. Ze 'orses drink only single-malt whiskey."

"They will be attended to," Hagrid answered solemnly, bowing.

"Thank you." She returned, smiling before turning to her students.

"Come!" Madame Maxime imperiously ordered her students and the Hogwarts crowd parted to allow them to pass up the stone steps.

There was the thud of a plank being lowered onto the bank. People were disembarking. All of them seemed to be built on the bulky side. As they approached, Harry realised that it was due to the long, shaggy fur cloaks they were wearing.

The man leading the group up to the castle was wearing a different type of cloak, with fur that was sleek and sliver like his hair.

"Headmistress McGonagall," He called out heartily as he walked up the slope. "How are you?"

"I'm well, thank you, Professor Karkaroff." McGonagall answered.

He was tall and thin, with short white hair and his goatee did not hide his rather weak chin. "Dear old Hogwarts," he said, looking up at the castle, smiling and revealing his yellow teeth. Harry noticed that the smile did not quite reach his eyes.

"Let's head in, shall we?" McGonagall suggested graciously.

Karkaroff smiled, leading his party of Durmstrang students into the Entrance Hall. When they passed, Harry had no trouble recognising the one in front, with prominent curved nose and thick black eyebrows.

"It's Krum," someone said excitedly. Most of them grew excited about the arrival of Viktor Krum and were frantically searching for things they could ask him to autograph.

The party from Durmstrang were allowed to enter the Great Hall first and the Hogwarts students followed in. Harry, Hermione and Neville walked over to the Gryffindor table to sit with their friends. Hermione rolled her eyes at the sight of the squealing girls as they sat down.

The Beauxbatons students had chosen seats at the Ravenclaw table, looking glumly around the large castle.

The Durmstrang group settled down at the Slytherin table, removing their heavy cloaks as they looked around in interest. They were wearing robes of deep blood red. They seemed to be impressed by the ceiling, which reflected the starry black sky outside and the gleaming golden plates in front of them.

When all the students had entered the Hall and settled down at their house tables, the staff entered, filing up the top table and taking their seats. Last in line were Professor McGonagall, Professor Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime. When their headmistress appeared, the students from Beauxbatons leapt to their feet. They did not return to their seats until Madame Maxime sat down. McGonagall was the only one left standing.

"Good evening, ladies, gentlemen, and esteemed guests." McGonagall began. "I have the great pleasure of welcoming you to Hogwarts. I hope that your stay in Hogwarts will be a comfortable one."

One of the Beauxbatons girls gave an unmistakable derisive laugh. Hermione frowned lightly.

"The Tri-wizard Tournament will officially open at the end of the feast. I invite you now to eat and drink."

She sat down and Karkaroff immediately engaged her in a conversation.

The dishes in front of them filled with food as usual. There were a greater variety of dishes in front of them, including some dishes he'd sampled during his holiday in France with the Grangers. They heartily dug in, enjoying the foreign food.

A voice interrupted them during one of their conversations, "Excuse me, are you wanting ze bouillabaisse?"

Harry turned around and looked at the speaker - it was the girl from Beauxbatons who had laughed during McGonagall's speech. A long sheet of silvery hair fell almost to her waist and she had large deep blue eyes and even white teeth.

Harry gave her a gracious smile, not noticing that most of his male housemates were gaping at her. Looking around the table, he realised that no one seem to be eating it. "No, I don't think so. Here, you may have it," said Harry as he gave the dish to her.

She seemed to frown slightly.

"You 'ave finished wiz it?"

"Yes, we have. Please help yourself." Harry replied, smiling. She cast him a dubious look, assessing him.

"I'm Fleur Delacour, Ooh are you?"

He was surprised that she had introduced herself.

"I'm Harry, Harry Potter," answered Harry, standing up. It was only common courtesy. Her eyes widened slightly as they fell upon the infamous scar.

"Do you need anything else?" asked Hermione, with a hint of impatience in her voice. Harry resisted the smile that was threatening to play on his lips, watching the exchange between the two females closely. Fleur shook her head slightly, giving Harry one last smile before carrying the dish carefully to the Ravenclaw table.

He resumed sitting immediately, gauging Hermione's reaction.

Across the Gryffindor table, the boys sitting at the table continued goggling at her even though she had returned to her table.

A frown creased her forehead as she continued to watch Delacour.

"Why do you think she's being so nice to you? She practically ignores everyone else," said Hermione tartly.

"I don't know. Reckon she might be a half-veela?" asked Harry, noticing the strange expressions on the boys' faces.

She followed the direction of his gaze and was surprised.

"Probably, judging from the way she had the effect on them. Do you think that's why she was so interested in you? You weren't affected by her presence like the rest," answered Hermione, contemplating. "You weren't affected by the sensual dance of the Veelas too."

He remembered that particular sight in the Quidditch Cup well. It was hilarious to see that some guys had succumbed to the charms of the Veelas and had nearly leapt off the stands to join them on the pitch. Looking across the table, he discovered that Fred and George ogling at her with open-mouth expressions. He snapped his fingers, jogging them out of it.

"She's beautiful!" proclaimed Fred hoarsely and George nodded vigorously. Angelina nudged George on his side irritably.

Harry snorted in laughter while George cast him a death glare.

"She's attractive but you don't have to act as if you haven't met a girl before," answered Harry, laughing.

"They don't make them like that in Hogwarts," exclaimed Fred, leaning side-ways so that he would have a full view of her. Harry shook his head in amusement and continued with his meal.

A/N: Hi, thank you for your reviews and for reading the story.

I was simply amazed to see that it's hitting the thousand mark.

ShyahsDad was correct: Cedric should be in his sixth year and Cho, in her to the Cannon (POA), Cedric was a fifth year when Harry was in his third. It's an error but I'll have to continue with it since correcting it will be a massive task.

Thank you, Tumshie for pointing out the spelling mistakes.

I hope you'll have a nice week!

Chapter 29

Beta-read by Frustr8dwriter

Professor McGonagall stood up again, once the final course was cleared away.

"I would like to formally open the Tri-wizard Tournament. Let me first introduce some of our esteemed guests for those who do not know them. This is Mr. Bartemius Crouch, Head of International Magical Cooperation." There was a polite applause but he continued to be expressionless. Harry could feel Hermione's dislike for the man. She had an intense loathing for people who mistreated others and the incident with Winky was still fresh in her mind.

"Over here, we have Mr. Ludo Bagman, Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports."

There was a much louder applause for Ludo Bagman and he acknowledged it with a jovial wave of his hand. "These two gentlemen along with me, Madame Maxime, and Professor Karkaroff will be the judges for the tournament. If I may have the casket, please, Mr. Filch?"

Filch approached McGonagall, carrying a large wooden chest, encrusted with jewels. It looked extremely old and the students began murmuring. He laid it on the table carefully.

"The competition will be comprised of three difficult and strenuous tasks, spaced over the next six months. It will be highly dangerous for those who are not prepared for the challenges that lie ahead. "

The Hall was filled with silence as they processed the gravity of her words.

"Three Champions will compete in this Tournament, one from each of the participating schools. They will be scored on how well they complete each task and the Champion with the highest score at the end of the competition will win the Tri-wizard Cup. The Champions will be chosen by an impartial selector... the Goblet of Fire."

McGonagall took out her wand and tapped on the chest three times. The lid creaked open slowly and she reached inside and pulled out a large, roughly hewn wooden cup. It was filled to the brim with dancing blue and white flames. McGonagall closed the lid and sat the cup on top of it so that it was visible to all.

"Anyone who wishes to enter this competition must write their name and school clearly on a slip of parchment and drop it into the Goblet. You have twenty-four hours to do so. Tomorrow night, the Goblet of Fire will return the names of the three students who will represent their schools. The Goblet of Fire will be placed in the Entrance Hall. To ensure that no underage students are able to participate, I will put an age line around the Goblet of Fire. No one under the age of seventeen will be able to cross this line. Finally, once a champion is selected by the Goblet of Fire, there will be a binding magical contract to compete."

McGonagall looked out at the quieted crowd. "In any event, it is getting late, so please head back to your dormitories. Good night to all."

"An age line?" Fred cried, his eyes gleaming as they crossed the Great Hall to the doors that led to the Entrance Hall. Hermione shook her head as they followed the twins out.

"You don't have time to think about it right now. We're off to celebrate Cedric's birthday tonight," reminded Hermione.

"Oh, we've already thought about it," answered George proudly. "Just watch, we'll get our names into the Goblet of Fire." The Durmstrang party reached the doors at the same time they did. Being ever the gracious host, Harry stopped to let them pass through.

"Thank you." Karkaroff said carelessly, before quickly glancing at Harry.

Karkaroff froze.

He snapped his head back at Harry and stared at him as if he couldn't believe his eyes. Behind him, the Durmstrang students were staring curiously at Harry as well. Harry saw comprehension dawn on most of their faces. Harry turned away, uncomfortable with their pointed looks and noticed that Krum was only looking at Hermione.

They were soon distracted by another voice.

"Yeah, that's Harry Potter," said a growling voice from behind them.

Karkaroff spun around and Moody was standing there, leaning heavily on his staff, his magical eye was glaring unblinkingly at the Durmstrang Headmaster. The colour drained from his face and a terrible mask of fury and fear came over his face.

"You!" The Durmstrang Headmaster exclaimed.

"Yes, me." Moody replied grimly. "Unless you've got something to say to Potter, Karkaroff, I suggest you move. You're blocking the doorway."

Without another word, Karkaroff swept his students away with him. Moody watched him until he was completely out of sight, a look of intense dislike on his face.

There was a look of annoyance on Hermione's face as she sat in her favourite loveseat with a book in her hands. Her friends were too preoccupied with looking around their private quarters to notice her irritation. Most of their friends had just arrived in their nightclothes as instructed. This was the first time they'd stepped inside Harry and Hermione's dormitory so they spent a great deal of the time exploring the place.

"I can't believe I just let her to do as she pleased!" grumbled Hermione, snapping her book shut. Harry repressed a chuckle and assumed his most sympathetic look. Hermione's eyes narrowed as she threw a pillow at him.

"We're in the same boat, remember?" Harry replied, stretching his limbs. "These quarters are as much mine as it is yours and we both

have to dress up for the slumber party. Besides, you know you made Daph really happy when you agreed to this. It's so hard to find a place to celebrate at night without getting caught by Filch."

Harry had to fish out a set of pyjamas for himself for the occasion.

"Only Daphne would come up with such eccentric ideas," commented Hermione, shaking her head.

Susan chuckled loudly.

It was going to be a surprise party - Cedric was only expecting a quiet date with Daphne. She would lead him upstairs and they would surprise him.

"I want to get married too if I can live in a place like this!" George exclaimed suddenly, throwing himself on the large armchair, excited.

"Does this mean you have good news to share with us? Perhaps congratulations are in order," teased Susan, looking at George.

His cheeks grew flushed and he kept his mouth shut.

"They're here," announced Harry, who was watching out for the signal of their arrival - Callan had flown into the sitting room and looked at them contemplatively. The teenagers leapt onto their feet and got into position hurriedly. None of them wanted to be on Daphne's bad side.

The lights turned off immediately with a flick of Harry's wrist, plunging them into semi-darkness. The crackling fire seemed to dim, taking the occupants in the room by surprise, casting a dull and yellow glow in the sitting room. Collectively, they held their breath when they heard approaching footsteps.

The door creaked opened quietly.

"Where are we going exactly?" The blindfolded Cedric asked. All he knew was that she was leading him up some winding stairs and that it was very quiet.

"We're nearly there," answered Daphne, carefully bringing him into the room and placing him in the middle of the dark sitting room. She caught Hermione's thumbs up and she nodded in response. "You may remove your blindfold."

An uncertain smile was playing on his lips. He slowly reached behind and untied the knot that was holding the blindfold around his eyes.

It was almost completely dark and empty.

Surprised, he turned to look at Daphne.

Suddenly, there was a deafening sound of whistling and spitting - a firecracker had been released. There was a loud bang as the flying firecracker exploded mid-air, transforming into a miniature Cedric before his eyes. The miniature Cedric took out his wand and cast the Aguamenti spell and words in baby blue appeared proclaiming "Happy Birthday!"

The words continued to stay hovering in mid-air while the miniature Cedric transformed into a blast of colourful confetti, raining down behind the words.

"Surprise! Happy Birthday, Cedric!" They shouted loudly, springing out from their hiding places.

The lights came on immediately. They were shooting confetti with their wands. He was taken aback when he saw all his close friends dressed only in their nightclothes, grinning at him. He looked at his girlfriend who was standing next to him and was surprised that she was also in her nightgown.

"Well, thanks everyone," said Cedric, drawing his hand through his hair and shaking out some confetti. "I do believe that I'm overdressed for my own party." He absently gestured to his thick Hogwarts robes after looking pointedly at their attire.

"No worries," replied Susan, coming forward with Astoria to give him his present. "It's from me and Astoria. We couldn't think of anything

else to give you. When Daphne suggested a slumber party, we decided to get you this. You can change into it."

He looked sceptically at the present, causing Daphne to laugh before he cautiously took the present. After some internal debate, he headed to the washroom to change. He came out of the washroom, looking highly uncomfortable in his new nightclothes. It was a bathrobe in dark blue with matching pants. Harry's eyes nearly bugged out when he saw the designs on his robe.

"Ooh, those are nice! Fred declared, laughing. "You might catch more snitches than Harry if you wear that to our next Quidditch scrimmage."

Golden snitches were splashed across Cedric's robes, flying in random direction. For a moment, it reminded Harry of models demonstrating the Brownian motion.

"I wanted to get custom-made nightclothes with a picture of you and Daph on it but Susan thought it was too much," grumbled Astoria, with her hands on her hips.

There were several sniggers from the Weasley twins.

"As much as I love your sister," Cedric began, flashing a disarming smile. "I think I like this much better."

"Glad you like it, brother," answered Astoria, hugging him. He returned the embrace earnestly, shooting Susan a grateful look.

"So now you're dressed for your party, don't you think it's time to start the party?" asked Luna excitedly. She stepped aside and Daphne came into view. She was carrying a small birthday cake in her hands and they began to sing.

Cedric was surprised to see that the cake looked unusually distorted. It took a while for him to discover that the wavy and broken lines on the cake were made to form "Happy Birthday, Cedric" With a dazzling smile, he made his wish and blew the candles.

"Remove the candle using your teeth!" chanted the twins cheerfully. Astoria, thinking it was a fairly good idea, encouraged him to do the same.

Cedric had no choice to oblige since it was his birthday. The Hufflepuffs made him do worse when they celebrated his birthday earlier that afternoon. There were eight candles in all. He carefully removed them with his teeth, biting the middle part of the candle and pulling it out. When his face was close to the cake, both of the twins slammed his head into the cake with all their might.

There was a loud splattering sound.

"What in Merlin's name!"

Cedric straightened himself.

The sponge part of the cake and the cream were all over his face, causing some of them to laugh. Cedric smiled good-naturally and absently cleaned some of the cake from his face with his fingers. Fascinated, he put his finger into his mouth and tasted the cream.

"Mm, delicious!" He proclaimed. Astoria and Susan exchanged unconvinced looks with each other, eyeing the remains of the cake. Susan was the only one loyal enough to taste it by putting a small bit of it into her mouth.

Everyone in the room looked anxiously at her, waiting for her judgement.

Her eyes widened suddenly after savouring the cake.

"It's really good!" Susan exclaimed, shocked. "Wow! Daph, I can't believe you made such a yummy cake."

"Really? Thanks." said Daphne absently, eying the two red headed males distastefully for destroying her efforts.

The Weasley twins had the sense of self-preservation to stay away from Daphne even though her anger had been defused.

"Daph, don't you think it's best that you to clean him up with magic before anyone else suggests another stupid idea?" said Susan, annoyed. The Weasley twins hid in the corner of the room, afraid that the girls would take revenge for what they did.

Daphne whipped out her wand and cleaned up his face and his hands with a simple cleaning spell and his face was cleared immediately of the cream and the sponge remains of the cake.

Cedric beamed from ear to ear, content to watch Daphne fuss over him.

"Thank you, love. That was the best cake I've ever had," spoke Cedric, leaning to kiss her lips tenderly. The rest of them gave the couple some space, setting out food for the party and gathering their presents. The Weasley twins didn't dare to tease them after pulling up that prank.

Luna was the first to present her gift to him. Cedric took the gift, eyeing the girl nervously.

"It's nothing too embarrassing, Cedric, I promise." Luna said, watching him expectantly.

For a moment, he wondered if he should open the present on the spot. Luna wouldn't give him something that would mortify him but might give him something out of the world that would take him by a surprise. He felt the gift and expelled the breath he was holding. It felt suspiciously like a book. It couldn't be that bad, could it?

Fascinated, Cedric tore the wrappings off the present.

An unmoving picture of a little blonde hair boy and a large tiger greeted him and he realised it was a collection of Calvin and Hobbes comics by Bill Watterson. He looked at Luna for an explanation since he had never seen such a book before.

"Muggles call these types of drawings comics. It is immensely entertaining and although it looks like it's for kids, it's really geared for

adults," Luna explained. He flipped the pages and noticed the illustrations in stiff boxes with speech bubbles. They mostly featured the two characters on the cover.

"This particular comic is really quite amusing," quipped Harry, grinning. "I'm sure it will add many hours of laughter into your life."

"Luna's afraid you might lose touch with your childish side now that you've come of age," remarked George, laughing. "After all, you're already very serious."

"Thanks. I can't wait to read it. It looks fascinating," answered Cedric, hugging the blonde girl. She returned his smile and stood aside in her rainbow-coloured nightdress.

"We couldn't think of a proper gift," said Harry, stepping up. "I hope you'll like these, even though it's quite practical. This is from me and Hermione, Sirius and Remus." Cedric's eyes widened at the sight of a large box. When he opened it, he was surprised to see that it contained quite a few expensive made-to-fit Muggle business suits and dress robes of every colour.

"I'm going to save a lot with these," answered Cedric as he replaced the lid on the box. "Thank you."

The Weasley twins gave him a trunk to store his fancy new clothes and important belongings. They had modified the trunk so that it had a compartment to hang the pricey clothes in. There was even a full-length mirror in it and the trunk was charmed to be weightless. Cedric was delighted with the useful gift.

"Allow me," offered Harry with a smile. He used a spell to hang all the clothes in the proper trunk compartment. "I learned that nifty spell from the book you gave me for Christmas."

"I guess that book turned out to be really useful," commented Cedric, reducing the large trunk into a small box and placing it with his comic book.

"Now I don't have to worry about having right clothes when I have to attend important functions." Cedric said with a smile. "Can you imagine if the trunk could be improved to include a changing room it? You'd be able to change into suitable attire whenever you need to."

"A portable changing room with built-in wardrobe," pondered Daphne. She started to list the disadvantages of it, wondering if there were solutions to the problem.

Cedric chuckled and wrapped his arm around brilliant girlfriend.

Neville was next and he gave him a beautiful ballpoint pen he had bought from a bookstore when he went shopping at a Muggle mall. Cedric loved the other Muggle pens he'd previously bought and was simply delighted to receive another one. There was plenty of good-natured ribbing when the group collectively came to the conclusion that Luna and Neville had gone out alone during the holidays to shop for Cedric's gift.

"For the last time, we weren't on a date," protested Neville, his face turning pink.

"Sure, way to go, Nev," answered Fred, giving him the wink.

They began eating as they exchanged recounts of their day. Despite their best efforts to finish the food, there was still a lot of food left. Harry and Hermione had cooked for the occasion and none of them wanted to waste their efforts. To solve the problem, they decided to have a modified pillow fight.

Daphne got her inspiration from a television programme that featured people competing against one another in difficult tasks to win the prize money. She described to Harry and Hermione what challenge she wanted to stage.

Harry and Hermione conjured two identical shaky platforms that stood a distance apart from each other. They magically modified the shape of the pillows so that they appeared to look like a stick with two large pillows attached to it.

The rules were plain and simple. The challenge was a modified joust: two competitors would have to attempt to knock each other off the platform with the modified pillows - no magic could be used. The person who fell off the makeshift platform would have to finish a plate of food.

They drew lots to pair up and the first to go was Astoria and Luna. They hesitantly climbed onto the platform and realised that it took plenty of skill to balance on the platform, not to mention hitting the other person. It took a while for them to get their balance on the platform. Luna got a hang of it a bit faster, since her leg muscles and sense of balance were far more developed than Astoria because of her constant physical training.

They took up the long bulky pillows and began jabbing each other awkwardly

In the end, Astoria fell off the platform while trying to prod Luna. She leaned too much when she had thrust the pillow forward and ended up losing her balance. The whole room was laughing at the humorous and awkward way they fought with each other. Astoria had no choice but to finish the plate of food. Luna heaved a sigh of relief when she realised she didn't have to do the forfeit.

Daphne and George went against each other next and were quite even in terms of balance. It was clear that Daphne was bent on exacting revenge from the twins since her blows were fierce, accurate, and swift. George found himself flinching from each hit he had to bear on his face and his knees. He did not have the opportunity to counterattack because she was completely relentless and it terrified him.

The match ended quickly with Daphne as the winner.

She ended the match with several well-aimed blows after she detected that he was at a particularly weak stance.

The room was silent immediately when George fell onto the floor. Everyone knew that he deserved every beating he got, but Daphne was far too intimidating when she was angry.

"Never am I going to cross Daph again in my life. She's scary!" commented a wide-eyed Fred.

Daphne ignored him and climbed off the platform haughtily into Cedric's arms. He was thoroughly amused by his girlfriend's antics.

Cedric fought against Neville next. The match was very exciting since they were both so competitive. Feathers were flying everywhere since they were hitting each other with all they had. They could not duck the blows the other was throwing because moving slightly might cause them to lose their balance. It became a long drawn out match since Neville refused to give up, hitting as hard as he was hit. Finally, Cedric won, narrowly and completely worn out from the lengthy battle. Neville graciously accepted his defeat and finished the pile of food on the plate.

They were excited when they realised that the two loggerheads, Susan and Fred were fighting against each other in the next modified pillow fight. They rarely saw eye to eye since they became friends, and were constantly poking fun at and irritating each other. It was interesting to see them having to face-off with each other.

Susan climbed up the platform, determined to make Fred pay dearly for his prank. Fred was confident in his own abilities, looking unusually calm.

The fight began immediately. Susan, like Daphne, was unusually aggressive and the force of her blows stunned Fred - it was heavy and swift. It seemed that Susan had been doing a fair amount of strength training.

"You've been doing a brilliant job with the girls," commented Harry. "I can see that their agility and their stamina have improved dramatically."

"It's not just your excising regime per se, the twins have never been as motivated as girls," answered Hermione, smiling.

Fred returned a fierce smile, fighting back with everything he had. His admiration for his friend had grown to another level. Susan persevered in her attacks, not giving Fred a chance to counterattack. Beads of perspiration began to form on their brows, as they paid a lot of attention to the parry. Finally, the match ended when Susan's stamina outlasted Fred's. He was knocked out of the platform with a heavy blow on his head.

He looked a bit dazed, sitting on the floor. Susan infuriated him further by immediately presenting him with the plate of food, which Fred grudgingly accepted.

The match that they were looking forward to was the match between their two self-defence instructors.

"Why am I always with you?" asked Harry, climbing onto the shaky platform and faced Hermione.

"I think the whole thing was rigged," answered Hermione, leaping on the platform as if testing her limits on the platform.

"Don't go gentle on Hermione, Harry," shouted Fred from aside. His pride had suffered when he lost to Susan.

Harry knew better not to - Hermione would be offended if he just let her win.

A smile was playing on his lips when he held his pillow. It was much different from wielding a sword.

"Mental shields up?" Harry asked.

She nodded, getting the feel of balancing on the platform.

"Ready?" Hermione checked, her eyes gleaming with excitement. Harry loved the competitive side of his wife. Chuckling, he attacked.

He became aggressive, going for her head and legs, trying to upset her balance while Hermione tried to parry his attacks with her pillow. She was forced to go defensive since he was raining blow after blow

on her. She held her ground, knowing that Harry's recklessness usually cost him and she was correct. Soon, there was an opening: his thrust was half a second slower than its usual pace, giving Hermione the opportunity to strike at the back of his knees.

Harry lost his balance for a second. Hermione was going for the kill by swinging the pillow hard on his face when he stabbed her, distracting her momentarily.

"Nice one, love," called Harry, grinning fiercely, bending down suddenly and swinging the pillow at her legs. She had shifted her weight slightly to one of her legs, in her desire to end the match quickly, making her less stable - a hit on the supporting leg would cause her to fall.

"That was done on purpose," added Harry, smirking as he aimed for her supporting leg.

Her eyes narrowed in frustration.

The sweeping action caused her to fall off the platform but she grabbed the pillow, tugging Harry onto the ground with her. When he reached out to hit her back leg, it had caused his centre of gravity to shift, making him more prone to fall.

Laughing, they lay on the ground.

"How do you propose to resolve this?" Harry asked, looking at Hermione with pride shining in his eyes.

"We'll share," answered Hermione, smiling.

They shared a plate of food together.

Soon, they collapsed onto the ground, their faces red with exertion. Those who had to finish the plate of food were feeling very bloated. Feathers, the remains of the intense pillow fights, scattered around the sitting room.

Looking out of the window, the teenagers realised that the sky was getting a little lighter, a clear sign that the sun was rising soon. Harry was too contented staying on the ground, watching Crookshanks entertaining himself by playing with the feathers. Katrina was watching him from the window ledge and he was sure that she was as entertained as him. The teenagers reluctantly climbed to their feet, cleaning the place up. Crookshanks got slightly miffed when Susan tried to clean up the feathers from the room and decided to leave a few for him to play.

After a short kip, it was time for them to head down to the Black Lake for their usual morning jog. Astoria thought that they were completely mad when they transfigured their clothes to the appropriate attire for jogging and headed to the lake after only a few hours of sleep. Several Durmstrang students were looking at them with interest as they jogged around the lake.

After a quick shower and a change of clothes, they went to the Great Hall for their breakfast. When they sat down at the Gryffindor table, they learned from their friends that the Durmstrang and the Beauxbatons students had already placed their names into the Goblet of Fire. Cho, once again joined them since Cedric wanted to keep an eye on her. For the first time since her parents' demise, she spoke to them willingly about Hogwarts students who were entering their names into the Goblet of Fire.

Throughout the day, everyone watched the Goblet of Fire closely whenever they had the chance. Cedric was tired of hearing his name repeated constantly after he entered his name during lunch.

Nearing evening, the Weasley twins decided to make an attempt on entering their names. The Weasley twins decided to use a Muggle contraption to assist them in putting the parchment into the Goblet of Fire. It was a long metal track that allowed a small little moving cart to travel on it. When it hit the end of the track, it would tip over, pouring the contents into the Goblet. They had modified it so that it would run on magic.

Fred stood outside of the Age line and held the metal track to the Goblet of Fire.

Everyone watched in trepidation as the cart carried three parchments across the age line and inched closer to the Goblet of Fire.

As the cart begin to tip itself to pour the parchments into the flames, it stopped.

"What!" Fred shouted in disbelief.

Did it just get stuck?

The Weasley twins couldn't believe their eyes.

"That was rather ingenious, Misters Weasleys. Unfortunately, the Goblet of Fire has its own protections to ensure that only parchments that are placed into by hand will be accepted." Professor McGonagall explained sternly. "That will be 50 points from Gryffindor for trying to hoodwink the Goblet of Fire."

The excitement and anticipation reached a fevered pitch by the time the sky darkened. Everyone was waiting impatiently for the announcement of the Champions as they ate. The Goblet of Fire was moved to the top table, in front of Professor McGonagall.

At long last, plates were finally cleared. There was a sharp upswing of noise within the Hall before it died off completely when Professor McGonagall stood up. The other teachers looked equally tense, only Mr. Crouch seemed to be utterly bored.

"The Goblet of Fire is nearly ready to announce the names of the Champions. When your names are called, please come up to the top of the Hall, to the adjoined chamber behind the staff table for further instructions."

Professor McGonagall took out her wand and extinguished most of the flames on the floating candles, encasing the Great Hall in semi-darkness. The Goblet of Fire began to glow even brighter; the sparkling blue and white flames were almost painful on the eyes.

Everyone held a collective breath and waited.

The flames turned into a rich red suddenly and sparks began to fly. Suddenly, a tongue of fire shot into the air and a charred piece of parchment fluttered out of it.

The hall gasped.

Professor McGonagall grabbed it and read it aloud. "The Champion for Durmstrang is Viktor Krum."

A storm of applause and cheering swept the Hall. Viktor Krum stood up and walked into the adjourning chamber.

The Goblet of Fire glowed red again and captured everyone's attention. A second parchment flew into the air and McGonagall caught it nimbly.

"The Champion for Beauxbatons is Fleur Delacour."

Fleur stood up gracefully, shaking her sheet of silvery blonde hair and vanished into the side chamber.

Tension began to mount higher since the Hogwarts Champion would be announced next.

The Goblet of Fire shone red again, spitting out the third piece of parchment.

With a grim smile, Professor McGonagall grabbed it. A smile played on her lips when she saw the name written on it.

"The Hogwarts' Champion is Cedric Diggory."

There was a sharp intake of breath as everyone turned to look at Cedric. He blanked out.

Everyone from the Hufflepuff table started jumping and screaming in joy. Fred and George were slapping his back enthusiastically when he finally got onto his feet. Daphne gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and sent him on his way. Susan, Luna, and Hermione were

equally excited for their friend, screaming in elation. Harry joined in cheering loudly for his friend. Cedric was grinning like a Cheshire cat when he walked down the table and vanished into the side chamber.

"Good, I trust that you'll give the Champions all your support. By cheering for your Champions..."

Professor McGonagall stopped speaking immediately and froze because the Goblet of Fire glowed red and spat out one more piece of parchment.

There was silence in the Hall as everyone was transfixed with the fourth piece of parchment.

The parchment slowly pirouetted and dipped.

It landed a distance away from the Goblet of Fire.

It felt almost like an eternity later when Professor McGonagall picked the final piece of parchment from the table and read it.

Her eyes widened dramatically when she lifted her head.

"Harry Potter," called Professor McGonagall, looking around the Hall.

What? Surely he'd misheard her?

He instinctively snapped his head to look at Hermione.

She was equally stunned.

"This can't be," he whispered under his breath.

He looked around the table.

All his close friends were eyeing him, open-mouthed.

Professor McGonagall's voice grew louder and a hint of steel entered her voice. "Harry Potter!"

"Go, Harry," encouraged Hermione, finally finding her voice.

Casting one last glance at Hermione, he climbed onto his feet and jogged towards the side chamber.

Surprise. Numbness. Confusion. Anger.

He was aware of the whisperings that seemed to grow even louder as he walked towards the entrance of the side chamber but it didn't matter. He couldn't believe that he could've been so careless. This mistake lit a flame in him.

He was clenching and unclenching his fists as he entered the small chamber. He cursed inwardly about his own negligence. Riddle was on the rise; this was no time for him to drop his guard.

Viktor Krum, Fleur Delacour, and Cedric were standing by the crackling fire when he entered the room. Fleur and Viktor looked mildly interested and surprised. A look of concern immediately crossed Cedric's face when he saw the expression on Harry's face.

"Did something just happen?" Cedric asked worriedly, with an intent look at Harry.

"I'm fine for now at least." answered Harry. He took a deep breath. "My name just came out of the Goblet of Fire."

Cedric's brows drew into a frown of bafflement. "How? You didn't enter your name into the competition," protested Cedric.

"I don't have a clue either," admitted Harry, balling his hands in frustration. He had no answers, just plenty of questions.

Sirius sent Dumbledore in to prevent you from taking part. They'll be arriving soon, said Hermione. Relax, love. The person responsible for this move must be still in the castle. Just keep your eyes and ears open.

Sure, Mione.

He expelled a breath, glad that he would be getting out of it. Somehow, he didn't feel as relieved as he thought he might. It was clear that someone placed him in this precarious position so that they could harm him easily. The Gryffindor in him didn't want to appear like he was cowering in face of danger by not participating in the competition; he would rather fight with all he had.

The door behind them opened and a large group of people came in: Professor McGonagall, followed by Mr. Crouch, Professor Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, Professor Dumbledore, and Ludo Bagman. Harry noticed that most of them were wearing grim expressions on their faces. Professor McGonagall looked particularly irate and stiff.

"A fourth champion. That is extraordinary!" exclaimed Bagman excitedly, rubbing his smooth chin, looking around the room. It was clear from their faces that none of them shared his enthusiasm.

Viktor drew his two thick eyebrows together.

"Two 'ogwarts Champion?" questioned Fleur, tossing her head haughtily. "What is ze meaning of this?"

"Are you trying to insult us by allowing this boy to compete?" Professor Karkaroff demanded, his black eye glinting with anger.

Harry straightened himself considerably and he rebuked, "If you don't mind, this boy has a name. But, you can address me as Lord Gryffindor. Living in Great Britain during your youth should have made you well aware of the rules of the English society." He raised his hand so that everyone could see the huge ring with the Potter's crest resting on one of his fingers, assuring them of his identity.

Turning to address the whole room, he spoke assertively, "Besides, if anyone should be outraged by the whole matter, it should be me."

Krum and Fleur seemed impressed by the way Harry seemed to handle himself.

Professor Karkaroff seemed momentarily taken aback. "What impudence! You're obviously in trouble yet you dare to speak up."

"In trouble?" echoed Harry in disbelief. "Why would I be in trouble? I had nothing to do with this. I refuse to participate in a competition that I haven't entered!"

There was an uncomfortable silence as they digested his declaration.

Stepping forward, Cedric lent his support to Harry.

"I can vouch that Harry did not enter his name into the competition." Cedric declared suddenly. "He's as surprised as the rest of us about being made Champion."

"Thank you, Cedric." Professor McGonagall said firmly. "Lord Gryffindor, Head of Most Ancient and Noble Family of Potter, has made it very clear that he did not enter his name in the competition. This should be enough for everyone here."

The two Headmasters kept their silence, albeit reluctantly.

"Now, we have to resolve the whole issue of a person who was chosen as Champion when clearly he did not enter his name," concluded Professor McGonagall calmly.

Madame Maxime straightened herself regally. "Exactly, do McGonagall 'ave any suggestions?"

Turning to Mr. Crouch, Professor McGonagall asked, "Is there any way out for Lord Gryffindor? He obviously does not want to participate."

"Rules are rules. As you've mentioned, it is a magically binding contract. Harry Potter has to participate," answered Mr. Crouch curtly, looking at Harry.

"Mind if I make a suggestion? Don't the rules also state that there will only be one Champion for each school? Since rules are rules, couldn't you enforce that and disqualify him?" added Dumbledore thoughtfully, stroking his long white beard.

Mr. Crouch seemed to contemplate over his answer. "That rule is usually enforced by the Goblet of Fire and it is unprecedented that the magical artefact makes an error by selecting two Champions from a school. However, a binding contract is established the moment his name comes out of the Goblet. Lord Gryffindor might not want to participate but he has to or else he will lose his magic. If Lord Gryffindor wants to continue using magic, he'll have no choice."

Harry wanted laugh. It was clear that no matter what choice he made, Riddle would get his way.

"It's not an option we can consider. If we decided to call off the Tri-wizard tournament because a high level sabotage has occurred..."

"No, I will not permit it. Hogwarts is just afraid of losing to other schools!" spoke Professor Karkaroff harshly. "The competition will go on. I see no reason for it to be called off."

"I'll not permit ze," argued Madame Maxime heatedly.

"Well, we will not allow Lord Gryffindor to participate." Amelia Bones interrupted suddenly, surprising everyone in the room. Sirius was beside her, looking forbidding. He dismissed Dumbledore immediately with a curt nod. "He is far too young to join. I will not allow an important member of Society like Lord Gryffindor to be placed in any unnecessary danger, especially when he was coerced to join the Tri-wizard Tournament."

The room fell still.

"This is Lady Bones, Head of the Most Ancient and Noble family of Bones and Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. The gentleman with her is Lord Black, Head of Most Ancient and Noble family of Black and Interim Head of Wizengamot," said Professor McGonagall, introducing the two new arrivals to the foreign guests.

"This situation is not that serious that we need to involve the Head of DMLE or the Head of the Wizengamot personally." Bagman insisted, looking around for support.

"I beg to differ, Ludo. It's a sabotage involving one of the Heads of an Ancient House. According to the law, it is serious enough for us to intervene," replied Amelia sternly. "Besides, Professor McGonagall was absolutely right. One need to be very powerful wizard to confuse the Goblet of Fire into thinking there are four schools, hence four champions."

"What would be the motive of this person then?" challenged Professor Karkaroff, "Besides giving Hogwarts added advantage."

"Where is ze evidence of the sabotage?" Madame Maxime added.

"You should know better, Karkaroff," barked Sirius, unable to curb his temper.

His face grew livid. "What are you exactly implying, Black?" Karkaroff demanded angrily.

"You exactly know what Lord Black's implying, Karkaroff," growled a voice near the door. It was Moody and he was limping towards them. "Lady Bones is correct in her deduction. The Goblet of Fire is a very powerful magical artefact. It takes a very powerful Confundus charm to tamper with it."

"Thank you, Alastor. The conversation is getting out of hand. We can spend all night on this but the Champions need their rest. We'll brief them accordingly and allow them to rest. It has been a long day for all of them. We can decide on the best course of action after that. Would that be alright with all of you?" asked Amelia, in an attempt to calm down the rising tensions.

The two other Headmasters of the school had no choice but to agree and Mr. Crouch briefed them accordingly. The first task would take place on first of October. The nature of the first task was not revealed since they wanted to test the courage of the contestants. The Champions were also cautioned not to consult any teachers. Krum and Delacour, accompanied by their Headmaster or Headmistress, left the side chamber. Cedric left, knowing that Harry would be in good hands with Sirius and Amelia.

"Crouch, since you're most familiar with the rules, what do you suggest?" asked Amelia finally.

"I don't know how the situation arose, but I'll speak in the capacity of the Head of Magical International Cooperation. We have worked very hard in order for the Tri-wizard Tournament to take place. The Ministry of Bulgaria protested against having the tournament after the World Cup incident and it took great efforts to assure them that their delegation would be safe here. To call off the competition without a significant reason would severely strain the relationship between France, Bulgaria, and Great Britain. It's a most imprudent course of action since it would be seen as arrogance on our part. Since Lord Gryffindor is the Head of one of the Most Ancient and Noble families, let him decide for himself. However, I must caution you, Lord Gryffindor. If you truly know your duty to the country, you must look beyond the personal injustice." spoke Crouch with a hint of impatience.

"It's more than a personal injustice, he could be badly hurt." Sirius protested harshly. "He's merely a fourth year."

"It's no more risk than the other three Champions are facing," said Crouch edgily. "You don't expect the other Headmaster and Headmistress to accede to your request when there is no clear evidence of an unfair threat to Lord Gryffindor. They are subjecting two of their best pupils to the same danger."

"The same danger? The other champions have a certain level of magical skills since they have passed their OWLs. Lord Gryffindor has not and he's the only heir to the Black and the Potter families. Are you going to be responsible anything happens to him?"

He tuned out Crouch's justification, seeking advice from his wife.

Hermione, what do you think? Harry thought jadedly.

There was a jumble of thoughts he could not make sense of. After a while, she answered. She didn't sound too pleased.

Riddle has finally made his move. We've been out-manoeuvred, at least this time. You'll have to participate.

He cleared his voice, getting the attention of everyone in the room.

"I've decided. I'll compete," said Harry simply. "But note that it will be under duress."

The eyes of Amelia and Sirius widened slightly.

"Taking account of the sabotage, I request that an investigation must be undertaken immediately." Harry went on.

"Naturally, it's the least we should do." Professor McGonagall agreed. Turning to Amelia, she said, "You have my permission to begin your investigation for the safety of our students."

"Then the matter is settled, Lord Gryffindor will compete as one of the champions," said Bagman elatedly, rubbing his hands.

The other heads of the schools were informed of the decision when they returned. None of them seemed too pleased with the outcome but they grudgingly accepted it since there was no other solution to the problem.

The journey back to his quarters was a quiet one. Neither Sirius nor Amelia said a word since they were too absorbed with their thoughts. He led them up to the sitting room. He was not surprised to see all his friends waiting anxiously for his return. Hermione approached him, wrapping him in a tight embrace that communicated all her worries before allowing him to join them. Their faces reflected their concern and it lifted his spirit slightly, knowing his friends would support him.

"Cedric, you shouldn't be here, I'm sure the Hufflepuffs would want to celebrate this achievement with you." Harry said when he spotted him among his friends.

"Celebration can wait. Hermione said that you'll be participating?" asked Cedric.

"Yes, that irritating Crouch reminded him of his duty to the country. We are entirely clueless about the identity of the person who placed Harry's name into the Goblet of Fire," answered Sirius, a hint of anger in his voice.

Amelia laid a hand on his arm.

"We're not exactly clueless. We know that this is the work of the Dark Lord. It's the loyal servant he spoke of in Harry's dream that has trapped Harry in this position. Besides, we're aware that he is going to use the Tri-wizard Tournament as a way to try to hurt Harry."

"Which indicates he has to stay within Hogwarts so that he could carry on with his plan," added Hermione wisely.

"You're right, Hermione." Amelia returned. "I'll have to divide my time between the Ministry and Hogwarts to solve the case. I haven't finished my investigation on the incident of the World Cup."

"Are you making any headway?" asked Harry.

"Yes, so far I've that there are at least two invisible participants in the scene. The first was carrying out justice by melting out punishment on the group of Death Eaters with a strange incantation that involved some sort of magical fire. The second shot the Dark Mark. I've no idea why the second might do so but clearly, he is another Death eater. I'm checking with the Unspeakables to learn about the properties of this strange spell. We might be able to track down the Death Eaters if the spell has any unique properties."

"That sounds very complex," commented Susan in awe.

"Don't you get the feeling that there are just too many things happening at once?" asked Luna. "I'm afraid they might all be connected. After all, would a person who has escaped from punishment do something like casting the Dark Mark? It's a work of an insanely loyal follower who was probably previously punished by law. A loyal follower who has not been discovered wouldn't have the courage to draw such attention to himself. I believe that same person

who cast the mark at the World Cup wouldn't mind sneaking into Hogwarts to carry out his master's plan."

"That's definitely possible. However, none of the convicted Death Eaters have ever left Azkaban. It was a life imprisonment and no one has escaped from prison, well except Sirius," answered Amelia, looking at Sirius. "And Peter."

"You don't really count Pettigrew-He's really more of a rat than a human after living as a rat for so is really only one way you can leave the cell and that's when you're dead. It isn't uncommon. Many stopped eating after being in there for a prolonged time," said Sirius, shuddering at the memory

"So it's another dead end," answered Amelia gloomily. "I'm hoping we'll be able to discover the identity of the person soon."

"Alternatively, you can feed everyone with a drop of Veritaserum tomorrow morning and asked them if they entered Harry's name into the Goblet of Fire. Wouldn't that solve your problem?" suggested Fred.

They all ignored him.

They continued to discuss the problem, however with the lack of information, there was little they could do. Amelia and Sirius could only encourage the teenagers to take lessons from Moody on self-defence since it was clear that Voldemort was finally on the move. After checking the time, the rest of the teenagers had to return to their respective dorms because it was almost curfew.

I think it's time to tell her about the night at Quidditch Word Cup. Hermione suggested through their link. If Riddle is on the rise, it will help her track his supporters.

Harry took her advice, leading Amelia into his study. Hermione, Luna and Sirius were sitting in the sitting room, speaking about possible ways to enhance the security of the quarters.

He cast the several charms to ensure privacy as soon as they had entered the study, surprising Amelia.

"There are several things I'm going to share with you that I don't wish be known by others. Forgive me for giving you this information so late, but we felt it was for the best."

"Is it about the Quidditch World Cup?" She probed curiously.

"Yes, we were there in the woods that night. We were supposed to have been headed back to Potter Mansion. However, I was driven by my curiosity to see what kind of troublemakers could induce such a panic in all. When I spotted them harassing the Muggles for sport, I lost it, and went after them."

"You set those flames upon them. How?"

"This is the part that has to stay off the record, Aunt Am. Hermione and I can manipulate the elements," replied Harry. As if to prove the fact, a ball of flame appeared in his hand. "It's associated with our soul bond."

She nodded in understanding.

"This type of flames is resistant to magic. It's waterproof and can't be put out in the normal ways. The death eaters realised this when it was on them and they couldn't do anything to stop the flames from burning their bodies."

"Yes, I saw that in some of the memories," answered Amelia, rubbing her temples. "Did you see the person who cast the Dark Mark?"

"No," began Harry. "But his deep voice suggested that it was a man."

Amelia frowned at his answer. "Thank you for telling me. I understand your need to keep what happened a secret. It would've been difficult to explain your presence at the scene where the Dark Mark was cast; not to mention the fact that knowledge of your abilities might have fallen on the wrong ears. Don't worry, I'll work around it."

Suddenly, a realisation dawned on her.

A smile of triumph lit her face. "I've got it! I don't know why I haven't thought of this before! I know how to track them. Thanks Harry! I owe you!"

She hurriedly bid her goodbyes to Hermione and Sirius, telling them she finally had a breakthrough. Her house elf appeared to take her and Sirius to her office.

They were finally alone.

"How do you feel about everything, Mione?" asked Harry tenderly, looking at her. She looked unusually tired.

"Worried and angry. I can't believe he cornered us," answered Hermione.

"We'll be a step ahead of him the next time," promised Harry, hugging her. She returned his hug, laying her head on his chest.

"We cannot get obsessed with trying to keep one step ahead of him," added Hermione finally. "It's unhealthy. I rather we enjoy the time we have then to spend that same amount of time wondering what he is going to do to you, to us."

A large smile played on his lips.

Taking her hand, he led her to the bed they shared and rested for the night.

Harry guessed that it would be a long and difficult day if the buzzing in the hall was any indication of it. Thankfully, he had friends who believed him without a doubt.

The news had spread like a wild fire that Harry was taking part in the competition as the fourth Champion. The Gryffindors were delighted that one of their own was participating in the Tri-wizard competition and hailed him like a hero.

Harry was expecting a backlash the equivalent of his second year when everyone saved Hermione and Ron shunned him because he could speak to snakes, but he was surprised that none of them seemed to be making really nasty remarks. He guessed it was because Cedric joined him at the table for breakfast and that their friendship was not affected at all. It seemed to spark off discussions in the school since some of them believed that Harry was desperate enough to steal the glory of being a Champion from his friend by entering himself into the Tournament.

The talk was soon squashed because none of his friends would allow such accusations to run unchecked. Professor McGonagall's clarification during breakfast helped to clear the air as well. The students then began to expect some sort of fall out between Harry and Cedric.

"I feel more assured that he's participating along with me. It's one less opponent to guard your back against. After all, I'm confident that Harry wouldn't do anything to harm me," replied Cedric when he was questioned by some of his curious housemates.

The talk soon died off after a few days when the school was more used to the idea of having Harry and Cedric as Champions.

All hell broke loose after that - it was difficult for either Harry or Cedric to escape impromptu autograph sessions from excited girls. Fred and George found their antics highly amusing and did impersonation of several girls just to tease the two of them but the girls did not find it remotely delighting.

Harry and Hermione constantly kept Amelia updated about their days. Their school life was the only thing that kept Amelia entertained. She, like the twins, teased him about those autograph sessions.

Things were finally looking up. The investigation into the Quidditch Cup night was finally beginning to yield some results. According to her, they were making good progress cross-checking the list of local guests at the Quidditch World Cup and the list of patients who sought treatment for special burns. It was tedious work but it was the best clue they had. Amelia ensured that none of the potential suspects got

a wind of the news by doing almost all the work herself. Amelia kept things as vague as possible, asking for records of patients who were hurt during the Quidditch Cup incident and reducing the scope of data herself. It was only a matter of time before she discovered those names. They would have to tread very carefully after that.

As a way to conclude their conversation of the day, four days after the announcement of the Champions, she decided to drop him a warning. "By the way, you can expect some sort of photo shoot soon for publicity. The Ministry is big on such things," said Amelia, rolling her eyes in annoyance.

"I can't escape, can I?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Good luck on that. A little publicity won't hurt if it's done correctly. It's a path we all went through. The Wizarding World is anxious to learn more about the young Lord Gryffindor. There wasn't a single article on you after Dumbledore's trial last year."

"Of course, they were more interested in Sirius and your relationship with him," teased Harry.

"Oh hush, Harry. Considered yourself warned."

The next day, they learned the summoning spell during Charms. Harry was patiently coaching Dean Thomas on the proper way of casting the summoning charm and like Hermione; he was attracting everything like a magnet.

"You have to concentrate on the object you want to summon and command it like you would ask a dog to follow your instructions," said Harry, watching Dean closely.

There was a frown of concentration on Dean's face and suddenly the book on his table zoomed into his outstretched hand. He gave a shout of delight.

Besides Harry, Hermione was coaching a fourth year Hufflepuff girl who was having difficulty.

Professor Flitwick chuckled quietly. He was content to leave Hermione and Harry alone to tutor their peers. They had a positive influence on their friends - Neville and Susan had recently begun to help their peers with their work too. It made things in class far easier. Assured that they were up to the task, he turned his attention to his other weaker students.

There was a polite knock on the door. A small third-year Gryffindor entered the class. It was Colin Creevey.

"Good afternoon, Professor. I'm supposed to get Harry Potter. The Champions are needed for some ceremony," said Creevey excitedly.

"Very well," Professor Flitwick began, turning to the class. "Mr. Potter, apparently you're needed. Since you've already mastered the spell, you may take your things and follow Mr. Creevey to the ceremony. By the way, 10 points for the ingenious way of explaining the summoning spell."

"Thanks, sir." Harry acknowledged with a nod and slowly packed his things by hand.

It won't be nice keeping the other Champions waiting, Harry, admonished Hermione. With a flick of her wand, his things packed themselves into the dragon-hide bag.

Harry mock-glared at Hermione. "Thanks," said Harry derisively, throwing his bag over his shoulder.

"Don't mention it." Hermione answered, smirking at him.

The corners of his lips quivered slightly. Seeing that no one was watching them too closely, he stole a kiss from her.

"It's for good luck. See you at dinner - if they are merciful," called Harry, waving.

Her pearly laugh filled his ears as he turned around and followed Colin Creevey out of the classroom.

A/N: Thank you for reading and reviewing. Wow. I had never expected that this story would have more than 1000 reviews by the 28 Chapter when I first started writing. Thank you for the support. Anyway, this chapter would have answered many of your questions about Harry's participation in the Triwizard Tournament. Next up, the appearance of Rita Skeeter. Have a pleasant week!

Chapter 30

Beta-read by Frustr8dwriter

For a moment, Harry didn't know whose company he would prefer better; the overly-excited and sycophantic Colin Creevey or the witch with heavily-jawed face and jewelled spectacles, looking at him with a calculating eye. He made his decision immediately, he preferred the eager third-year but Colin had already bid him goodbye and left the small classroom.

Looking around the room, he saw that they were setting up for some sort of event. A long velvet cloth covered the entire length of the wall. There was a long table before that wall and it too was covered with the same cloth. Six chairs were placed behind it. No one was there to save him from her clutches.

"Lord Gryffindor, it's an honour to finally meet you in person," said the witch when she approached him. "I'm Rita Skeeter, journalist with Daily Prophet." She watched him closely, waiting for the hint of recognition in his eyes.

Realisation dawned upon him instantly. This was the lady who had turned the tides against Dumbledore with an article last year, guided by Lord Oswald Greengrass. She was also the journalist who won the top award for writing a ground-breaking article that shook the whole political world of Magical Britain and disliked the Ministry with a passion.

"Surely, after winning several awards for your spectacular article, you aren't assigned to getting the scoop at such a small event like the Triwizard Tournament?" Harry commented finally, maintaining an expressionless face.

She smiled, flashing unusually neat sparkling white teeth. He should have expected it, since every inch of the witch, from her elaborated hairdo to her accessories, hinted extravagance.

"Oh, I volunteered to do it. After all, I've always wanted to meet you in person and do an exclusive interview with you about your past. Surely you won't mind?" asked Skeeter, her eyes gleaming.

An exclusive about his past? Shouldn't she be featuring about the Triwizard Tournament?

She misinterpreted his silence for consent and tried to reach for him with her scarlet talons but he nimbly avoided it by side-stepping, shocking the reporter.

"You'll have to check with the organisers if as a Champion, I'm required to give you this interview. I'm sure they'd have some other ideas about these interviews as a way to promote the tournament, and not my past." Harry replied evenly, keeping the outrage out of his voice. "Also, I'd appreciate if you would refrain from trying to grab me in that manner in the future. I won't be able guarantee your safety the next time." Searching around for an escape, he saw Cedric. "Would you excuse me?" asked Harry courteously, moving swiftly away from her before she could reply.

Elissa would be very proud of him for the way he handled the situation, he thought.

He saw the amusement in Cedric's eyes when he approached him.

"I see that someone has set her sights on you." Cedric remarked teasingly, giving Skeeter an imperceptible look.

"It's my charm," answered Harry dryly. "I feel like an eel."

"You were as slippery as one anyway," continued Cedric, laughing, looking around the room with mild interest. Skeeter was now speaking to Bagman. No doubt, asking him for his permission to do an exclusive with the young Lord. They approached the two other Champions who were now in the corner of the room. Krum was looking as moody as ever but Fleur seemed excited to see them.

"Harry, it is nice to see you," said Fleur sweetly, tossing her long sheet of silvery blonde hair. "And you iz Cedric Diggory?"

"Nice to see you again, Fleur Delacour," said Cedric, smiling genially. He seemed as unaffected by her charms as Harry. Looking around, Harry realised that the photographer wasn't to be able to take his eyes off her.

That's another who can't resist her charms, he thought to himself.

She returned the smile cordially, watching Harry out of the corner of her eye.

"You're a Lord at such a young age. Zis iz amazing," said Fleur admiringly. Cedric had to stifle a chuckle, watching her trying to capture Harry's attention by batting her eyes and flipping her long hair.

"No, not really. It's because of an inheritance. It isn't by virtue." answered Harry absently. He was far more interested in the reason they were gathered in the small classroom than the girl before him. "Why do you think we're here?" It was an attempt to make sure that Fleur could not exclude Cedric in the conversation.

"We're here for the Wand Weighing Ceremony. According to Mr Bagman, they're checking to make sure our wands are fully functional," explained Cedric. He flashed an affable smile at Krum. The grumpy national player seemed to lighten a bit and returned a polite smile, surprising Harry. Harry took the opportunity to introduce himself to the elusive Quidditch star and it was a bit uncomfortable since Krum appeared to become even more sullen. Cedric noticed the change in Krum's attitude but kept mum. Inquisitive about their schools, Harry asked the two other Champions. Fleur was very forthcoming with information about Beauxbatons but Krum chose not to share much.

In the middle of the conversation, Bagman, accompanied by Skeeter, approached them. He introduced the journalist to the rest of the Champions. Her attention was solely fixed on Harry, even as she acknowledged the other Champions.

Turning to Bagman, she said, "I would love to interview all of the Champions. You know, ask them individually about what it's like being a Champion."

"Sure, why not? I'm sure these four won't mind. They'd have expected that there'd be some sort of publicity," answered Bagman, smiling.

"Splendid! Why don't I start with the youngest, Lord Gryffindor?" Skeeter returned, smiling.

Harry ignored her, turning to talk to Ludo Bagman instead. "Mr. Bagman, as one of the organisers of this competition, you must be very familiar with the rules. I was hoping you could clarify something for me."

He seemed surprised by the change of topic. "There aren't that many rules, Mr-Lord Gryffindor. I'll see if I can," answered Bagman, smiling.

"I'm only magically bound to represent my school as a Champion and participate in all three tasks of the Tri-wizard Tournament. There's no rule stipulating that I'd have to interact with the media, am I correct? In another words, I'm allowed to reject being interviewed." asked Harry politely.

"Well, yes. You're indeed correct," answered Bagman hesitantly, looking between Skeeter and him. "Even though it is not stated in the contract, it's good for publicity and most people would jump at the chance to be featured in the newspaper."

"Everyone would love to hear about the Tri-wizard tournament from the Champion's perspective." Skeeter persuaded.

"I'm not the only Champion and the Tournament itself has barely started," said Harry. "Please don't take offence, but I don't want to be interviewed by anyone."

Skeeter looked affronted by his rejection. The rest of the champions were looking at him with admiration.

He was saved by the entrance of the rest of the panel of judges.

"That was impressive but you're in for big trouble, Harry. You know what kind of journalist Skeeter is," whispered Cedric before they took their seats. They watched Skeeter move swiftly across the room to sit in a chair placed at the corner.

Madame Maxime, Professor Karkaroff, Professor McGonagall, Mr. Crouch, and an elderly gentleman entered the classroom. He recognised the man at once: it was the eccentric wand maker he had bought his wand from four years ago, Mr. Ollivander. It made sense, who else but a wand maker could determine if wands were functional? All of them save Professor McGonagall took their seats behind the velvet-covered desk. The stern Headmistress stood regally by her seat and welcomed the Champions to the Wand Weighing ceremony with a short speech.

Mr. Ollivander checked every wand thoroughly; confirming the core and the wood of the wand with the owner before returning the wand. Harry discovered it was possible for Wizards to make their own custom wands since Delacour used a hair from her grandmother as core for her wand - she was indeed a half-Veela because her grandmother was a Veela. Mr. Ollivander took a longer time with his wand, no doubt caught up in his memory of selling that particular wand. Harry was glad that he did not announce the core and wood of his wand and returned his wand after proclaiming it to be in working order.

They took a group photo for the Daily Prophet. It took a long time since Skeeter and the photographer had disagreements about the positions of the Champions. She managed to insist on having individual shot of each Champion before Professor McGonagall put her foot down and called it a day. Harry immediately dashed out of the classroom before anyone could stop him, reducing any chance of Skeeter of asking him again for an interview.

However, Fleur and Cedric managed to catch up with him. They slowed down and fall into step after checking that the coast was clear. Halfway, Cedric remembered that he had to meet Cho before dinner and hurried off towards the Ravenclaw tower, leaving Harry to Fleur.

"As Lord and ze Harry Potter, you iz very used to interviews?" asked Fleur, amused. She seemed to be pleased to have the opportunity to spend some time alone with him.

"Actually no, I like my privacy." Harry answered. Dobby and Charles had always helped him to turn down all the requests for an interview.

"I've never met another like you." Fleur said suddenly, turning to look at him closely. "You iz not affected by my charms?"

"I suppose not, since I'm not acting like an idiot," replied Harry, smiling and pointing to several guys who had walked past them. One of them was staring at Fleur so hard that he walked into the wall.

She laughed, flipping her hair in her usual haughty way. The unfortunate guy scurried off quickly, embarrassed.

"Why not?" questioned Fleur finally.

"I'm not sure. Hermione thinks I'm immune to such charms. I suspect she knows the reason why but chooses to keep it to herself." Harry said, his face breaking into a large grin at the thought of his wife.

"Would she be ze brown-hair girl 'oo iz always with you?" asked Fleur thoughtfully. "Ze one 'oo iz very jealous when I'm talking to you?"

Harry chortled at her description. She had interpreted Hermione's impatience with her as a sign of jealousy. "She wasn't jealous. She was irritated."

"Irritated zat I speak to you?" Fleur inquired snootily, flipping her hair.

"No, irritated that you laughed during Professor McGonagall's speech and checked me out like a piece of meat in front of her," replied Harry plainly. "It was very uncomfortable." Harry added in an afterthought.

Fleur let out a pearly laugh at his description of her stare. She halted right before the door that led to the Great Hall. The Entrance Hall was teeming with students entering and leaving the Great Hall. "I'm sorry

about zat." Fleur said earnestly, surprising even herself at her sincere apology.

Harry arched an eyebrow in surprise; nevertheless he accepted the apology graciously with a smile.

Fleur returned the smile sweetly.

"Would zis Hermione be your girlfriend?" asked Fleur quietly, looking at him intently.

"We're in love," answered Harry, his smile reflecting the affection he had for his wife.

Her eyebrows contracted slightly at his answer and she captured his left hand with both of her hands, lifting it into view. Harry was too stunned to even react; all he could do was to watch her.

Fleur was scrutinising his hand closely. After awhile, she declared haughtily, "I zee that she 'as not left her mark on you."

He had no clue about what she was referring to.

"You'z not engaged," explained Fleur, her eyes dancing with amusement.

"Oh." How should I explain that the wedding ring is invisible?

The amusement in her eyes was replaced by determination.

"I'll be ze first..." promised Fleur, her voice taking a seductive edge, "and last to do that." She gazed at him boldly, leaving no room for misconstruing her meaning.

He could only stare at her silently, numb with shock and disbelief at her audacity.

Fleur laughed vibrantly at his reaction as she let go of his hand.

"See you soon, 'arry!" Fleur bade, smiling and walking briskly towards the entrance.

Did she just promise that she would propose to him?

He shook his head of those thoughts and entered the Great Hall.

As usual, the place was packed with students. His housemates cheerfully greeted him when he neared the Gryffindor table. It was not difficult to spot his wife. Hermione was sitting at the table with their friends, buried in a book, eating and reading at the same time. She was so absorbed with her book that she only noticed Harry when he slipped into the empty seat beside her.

"More books on exercising?" Harry asked, looking at the cover of the book.

A look of surprise crossed her face before she smiled.

"Hi, Harry, you made it. It seems that they were merciful enough to wrap up just in time for dinner," commented Hermione, helping him to fill his plate with food.

His face broke into an impish grin. "Thanks to Professor McGonagall." He took the plate from her, gave her a kiss on the cheek in gratitude, and began eating. "Why do you need to read up?"

"I'm running out of ideas for training. They say it is important to have a varied training regime. I've made the arrangements with Professor Moody. Professor McGonagall let him know what we needed and he agreed to meet with all of us Thursday evenings." Hermione explained.

"Okay, that's great news," said Harry absently, rubbing his thumb over the simple gold band. The lack of excitement in his tone made her frown.

"Did something happen?" Hermione asked, setting her book down. Her anxious tone distracted him from his thoughts and he looked at her.

"No, it's nothing really." He assured, holding her hand. "Riddle hasn't made his next move. I'm thinking about something else."

She relaxed visibly.

"So what is it?" She probed. It was clear that she was not going to drop the issue.

He rubbed the back of his neck nervously, thinking of the best way to put it across.

"Fleur seems to be attracted to me..." began Harry uncertainly.

"Like all other girls." Hermione muttered edgily, waiting for him to get to the point.

After a debating internally for a while, he chose to recount the whole incident instead of making wild assumptions.

Hermione seemed unusually calm about it, keeping her silence until he finished his tale.

"She's fascinated with you because you're different and was telling you that she will act on it," concluded Hermione plainly. "It'll be a sticky situation - she's confident of her own ability to charm you. I have a feeling she might even see this as a game and her competitive nature will drive her to attempt to win at any cost."

Harry looked perplexed. "Win? What would she win?"

Hermione laughed at his response. "You, my love. Have you consider what a good catch you are? You're famous, rich, and powerful - and you have a title."

He was still bewildered.

"She can't exactly win, can she? That can't happen because I already have you," continued Harry, bemused.

Hermione gave him a sly look before answering.

"Exactly. We know it, but others don't. However, this doesn't mean you should stop resisting her attempts. I only permit one mistake and you've already made one." concluded Hermione, turning back to her book.

Harry threw his head back and laughed loudly. He was tickled by the fact that his wife seemed to accept it rather easily. There was a time he was sure that she would have kicked up a fuss. It seemed that she had grown to be more secure in their relationship. It sort of reminded him that he shouldn't worry about Krum; after all, he hasn't declared that he wanted to put a ring on his wife. Harry would call him out for a duel if Krum every attempted to do that. However, he couldn't help but worry. He had a feeling that Krum disliked him for a reason and that reason was probably Hermione.

"By the way, if Skeeter's bothering you, just threaten to fire her. The last time I checked, you're still a major share holder of Daily Prophet, along with Uncle Os. You really ought to pay attention to the things you own, Harry," admonished Hermione, training her eyes on her book.

"Yes, dear." Harry replied, glad that he could deal with Skeeter that next time she harassed him.

Then it hit him - something wasn't right. He'd only told her about the incident with Fleur, how did she know about Skeeter?

"I didn't have to tell you what happened with Fleur, did I? You already knew!" He exclaimed, slapping his forehead for his stupidity. He should've known that his wife would be watching over him through their link. "That's why you're so calm!"

Hermione neither deny nor confirm the allegation, choosing to ignore him, and read her book.

Harry debated with himself for a while through dinner but he finally decided that he had to clear the air up with Fleur before things went

out of control. With only Crookshanks accompanying him, he went to look for Fleur.

It was completely dark when Harry exited the Entrance Hall to the grounds of Hogwarts.

I supposed I'll have to create a diversion if she becomes too forward with you? Crookshanks asked dryly, trotting along his master.

"Not really, I just feel it's more appropriate not to go alone. I couldn't find the right person to come with me." Harry answered sheepishly.

Harry walked swiftly down the slope to the edge of the Forbidden Forest where Hagrid's wooden hut stood. Two hundred yards away from the cabin, large powder-blue carriages stood, horseless. The light from these carriages illuminated the area and he could see Beauxbatons students entering and exiting the gigantic carriages.

Harry walked up to one of the students and politely enquired about Fleur's whereabouts. The group of girls recognised him immediately because of his distinct scar. Someone graciously went to get her while Harry politely chatted with them. He learned that the carriages were their sleeping quarters and that they were attending lessons with sixth and seventh-year Hogwarts students.

Fleur soon arrived, pleased that Harry was looking for her.

"Hi, 'arry. Didn't zink zat you might look for me so soon." said Fleur merrily. Her glance wavered to Crookshanks for while before returning back to Harry, fascinated that he'd brought his pet with him. The girls bade them goodnight and went back to their carriage.

He drew his hand through his short hair.

"Um, I needed to speak to you," said Harry, conscious that everyone from Beauxbatons seemed to be watching them. Fleur noticed his discomfort and led him closer to the Forbidden Forest for privacy.

"Yes?" Fleur asked patiently when they were completely out of earshot but still in clear view of the other students.

"Fleur, I have to decline your offer respectfully," began Harry sincerely but firmly. "I'm serious about Hermione and I don't wish to give you false hopes or to embarrass you in the future."

The smile from her face faded away and she became insistent.

"If you iz not married, zings is not fixed," retorted Fleur, taking a step closer to him. Crookshanks arched his back and snarled loudly, surprising her and she halted.

"It is for me, I can't picture anyone else but Hermione as my wife," said Harry calmly, watching Crookshanks out of the corner of his eyes.

Her eyes widened with disbelief.

"'ow would you know zat I am not better zan 'er?" demanded Fleur.

Crookshanks snarled even louder. My mistress is definitely better than you, vase!

Harry smiled indulgently, choosing not to answer that question.

"It's getting late and I've to head back. I don't mind having new friend, Fleur, but nothing more than that. So please re-consider your actions. Good night," concluded Harry, walking away. Crookshanks shot her a dirty look before smugly following Harry back to the castle.

Harry and his friends were discussing about possible places to continue their training the next day when sounds of flapping wings announced the arrival of the morning mail. The barn owls delivered several copies of the Daily Prophet to them since all of them but Luna, subscribed to it.

The headline of the edition caught his eye immediately. Harry immediately grabbed the paper for a closer look and found that his eyes weren't deceiving him.

Lord Gryffindor, Champion of Hogwarts Engaged to Mademoiselle Delacour, the Champion of Beauxbatons?

By Rita Skeeter

The Tri-wizard Tournament, organised by the Department of International Magical Co-operation and Department of Magical Games and Sports this year, proved to be a too effective way in establishing friendships between the young witches and wizards of different nationalities. Sparks seemed to be flying between two of the Champions, Lord Gryffindor, Head of the Most Noble and Ancient Family of Potter and Fleur Delacour, a stunningly pretty seventeen-year-old girl and Champion of Beauxbatons. One of the most eligible bachelors might soon find himself married.

Fleur Delacour is the heir of the rich and famous aristocratic family in France, the Delacour, and currently is in her final year at Beauxbatons. The Delacours, like the Potters, wield considerable influence in France and own a great deal of enterprises. As such, the teenagers are evenly matched in terms of status, wealth, and power. Undeniably, if the two teenagers continue to take their relationship to the next step, marriage, it will be the best match of the century.

According to Colin Creevey, a Hogwarts student, it was a love at first sight for Delacour and Lord Gryffindor. She had approached Lord Gryffindor to strike up a conversation with him on the night she arrived at Hogwarts and they soon became fast friends. They were said to be always found in each other's company.

It was apparent that they took their friendship to another step. Delacour was completely enamoured with the young Lord and she was seen boldly proposing to him in public after the Wand Weighing Ceremony. Lord Gryffindor appeared to be very shocked but pleased and he accepted the proposal in a heartbeat. Lord Gryffindor was even seen heading over to the sleeping quarters of the Beauxbatons to speak to his fiancée after dark.

It is not clear if her parents had already accepted the engagement between the young couple. Lord Gryffindor and Delacour would need the approval of the Head of the Delacour Family before they can be

formally engaged. Lord Gryffindor, who was emancipated last year, on 29th of July 1993, is allowed to marry. One would expect to see if they could overcome the hurdle of competing against each other in the Tri-wizard Tournament before they tie the knot.

The first task of the Tri-wizard Tournament is scheduled on the 1st of October at Hogwarts, School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. There will be three tasks in total and the competition will run until February of next year. Lord Gryffindor will be competing against his fiancée, Victor Crumb, and Derrick Diggery for the Tri-wizard Cup.

For more information on Tri-wizard Tournament, turn to page 2

For more information on Fleur Delacour, turn to page 3

For more information on Lord Gryffindor, Head of the Most Noble and Ancient Family of Potter, turn to page 4.

There was a picture of Fleur, standing close to Harry, holding his hand that accompanied the article.

Harry was rendered completely speechless when he finished the article. Skeeter had completely ignored the two other champions and misspelled their names, even the Quidditch Star, Viktor Krum. Flipping through the newspaper, he discovered that she did a page-long biography each on him and his supposed fiancée.

His wife was laughing when she was finished with the article. The article would have been more convincing if Skeeter had gotten the names correct. She had to give credit to Skeeter for getting several facts correct like the background of the Delacours. Elissa had covered the important Wizarding families in France once and she had spoken of the Delacours. The Delacours were considered to be the oldest and most well-connected families in France. It would have severe repercussions if the Delacours got a wind of this false news.

"What was that about, Harry?" demanded Susan, ignoring Hermione. "When were you engaged to that girl?"

"I'm not. It's just Skeeter. How could you trust an article which misspells Krum's and Cedric's names?" Harry asked, setting his paper on the table.

"She couldn't have fabricated the photograph. Why was she holding your hand?" probed Daphne, pointing to the picture.

Harry looked around and noticed that everyone seemed to be listening into their conversation. "Since we've finished with our breakfast, let's head to somewhere private to speak. I'm expecting a call from Sirius or Aunt Am soon," answered Harry, standing up, offering a hand to Hermione.

The Great Hall watched the exchange between Harry and Hermione silently in anticipation.

"I guess they're expecting me to throw a fuss?" Hermione inquired in a voice so soft that only Harry could hear her. The amused twinkling in her eyes made him forget about his irritation and he smiled.

"What a sight it would be if you choose to hex Delacour for snatching me away from you. I'd be more assured that you're crazy about me, the same way I'm insanely in love with you." Harry whispered teasingly.

Hermione's brows contracted slightly in mock annoyance. "It gives you pleasure seeing me fighting to keep you, doesn't it? I'm not doing anything to boost that male ego of yours, love."

Harry laughed and tenderly kissed her on her lips. "That's for those who foolishly believe that you're finally available," he whispered when he drew back.

Hand in hand, the couple left the Great Hall, ignoring their sniggering friends and the gaping students in the Hall. Once again, the Great Hall was buzzing with conversations, discussing the authenticity of the article.

They headed up to the couple's marriage quarter for some privacy and when they were all settled, Harry told the whole tale of what occurred between him and Fleur.

"So she actually proposed to you!" exclaimed Susan in outrage.

The Weasley twins whistled and slapped Harry's back admiringly.

"I'm surprised that the Daily Prophet got that right," quipped Luna distractedly. "The Daily Prophet has earned a terrible reputation of fabricating the truth."

"Yes, it sure does." Harry agreed distractedly, "I've tried to clearly explain the situation to Fleur last night after dinner."

It was then when he received an incoming call from Sirius, he transferred the call to the large mirror mounted in the sitting room so that he could participate in the conversation.

"I see that you've gotten yourself in a fix, pup. Getting too attractive for your own good, most eligible bachelor?" asked Sirius jokingly, after exchanging greetings.

"Speak for yourself, Sirius," answered Harry, laughing.

"Harry offended Skeeter at the Wand Weighing Ceremony yesterday." Cedric explained simply, leaning into his seat.

"I see. So what are you going to do about it? Amelia's suggestion was to demand a letter of apology from the Daily Prophet because it might affect relations between us and France if the Delacours find out about it."

"Same sentiments," said Hermione, looking at Harry. "We've even heard about them in our travels in France." Harry nodded.

"Uncle Os and I are the major shareholders of the paper, Sirius." Harry reminded. "Do you think I should send a letter of warning to her for publishing such false news?"

"That's an excellent idea," said Sirius, smiling. "I suppose it is something you want to do yourself?"

Harry nodded. "Hedwig tells me I have a pile of letters waiting for me in my study. I've a feeling some of them might be consequences of Skeeter's article." He grimaced at the thought of it.

Sirius laughed at the frown on his godson's face.

"Don't bother replying if they are congratulating you on your phony engagement. Just issue a statement thanking the public for their congratulations but that the information the paper printed was completely incorrect." suggested Sirius.

"I'll take your advice. I'll see you soon," said Harry.

They bade one another good-bye before they cut off the communication. Harry went into his study to answer his correspondences while his friends used the time to do some revision.

The article took the Wizarding World by a storm. He had received many letters from Head of Houses congratulating him on his engagement to such a prestigious family. He decided to save replying to all by taking Sirius's suggestion. He made a quick trip to the office of Daily Prophet and he was courteously showed to the office of the Chief Editor. Assuming the sternest expression he could muster, he carefully explained the dire consequences of the fictitious article. After getting an earful from the Lord about his duty to the public and the company, an utterly repentant chief promised to send a letter of warning to Skeeter on behalf of the newspaper, and published a letter of retraction complete with the accurate information as well as Lord Gryffindor's letter.

Harry made a note to revamp the Daily Prophet as soon as possible as the Chief Editor showed him out. Dobby took him back to Hogwarts and was in time for lunch.

The kiss at breakfast stamped most of the speculation that Harry was engaged to Fleur. However some were convinced that the news was true and Harry was engaged to Fleur for political reasons. Harry was

after all a Head of an Ancient family and it was not uncommon for them to marry out of duty - taking a wife who could increase his influence and wealth in the society. Hermione, being a muggle-born, with no connections in the society, increased the likelihood.

Colin Creevey apologised to Harry profusely during lunch. Apparently, Colin had only mentioned that Fleur seemed to hit off with Harry well from her first night in Hogwarts but Skeeter had expanded on his statement. Harry forgave the overwrought third-year immediately, seeing that Colin would probably kill himself if Harry did not.

Most of the gossips died down the next day when a one-page apology was printed in the newspaper. Daily Prophet apologised for the false news regarding Lord Gryffindor's engagement and stated that they had warned the journalist. They printed the letter by Lord Gryffindor to thank all who had congratulated him, and assured them that he would announce the news himself if he got engaged in the future. Harry and his friends were sitting at the Gryffindor table, eating quietly while everyone else was preoccupied with the articles.

Harry was in the world of his own, concerned over a different matter.

Susan, who was sitting next to Harry, discreetly nudged Harry, urging him.

He glared at his friend for a while and gave a sigh, regretting that he asked her for her opinion.

Hermione raised her eyebrows slightly, eyeing them cautiously.

Harry knew that he could have done this in private. Harry had always wanted to do it for a long time, but couldn't find the right time to do so. His friends, especially Susan and Luna, always seemed disappointed that he hadn't gotten around to giving her the gift since last year.

Susan gave him another nudge on the ribs, this time not so subtle. Her action captured the attention of all their friends sitting at the table and they were giving them the strange and puzzled look. Harry reluctantly got onto his feet. The entire Hall fell silent immediately, as if sensing something would happen.

He took several deep breaths. It was now or never.

Being a true Gryffindor at heart, he decided to muster courage and do what he had planned to do. With a confident smile on his face, he strode to Hermione.

Hermione was completely baffled and Harry's smile widened - he took pride in surprising his wife.

He stopped right before her, watching her for her reaction.

"Mione," He began gravely. "Well, I know we've been together for more than a year and I did promise that you wouldn't miss out on anything. I want to make a lasting commitment so that everyone can see that I am completely devoted to you," said Harry, smiling and presenting her with a small box. "Happy Birthday."

He cautiously opened the box, revealing a gold Celtic knot ring. Hermione went into her inquisitive mode, scrutinising the ring the same way she would examine a book, and discovered that there seemed to be no end or beginning to the knot.

Her eyes reflected surprise when she caught the sight of a matching ring on his hand.

He was giving her promise rings, she realised finally. As usual, he did not spare any expense since they were rings that he selected himself. She could understand why he would give her a promise ring. Edmund carefully made their wedding rings and gave it to them along with his blessings. Now, Harry wanted to give her another ring which would serve as a public declaration to all that they were serious about each other.

He gently took out the ring and slipped it into one of her fingers.

"Thank you," answered Hermione, smiling. She leaned forward and kissed him lovingly.

The Hall burst into a deafening applause.

Harry and Hermione ducked their heads; embarrassed by the attention they were given.

To make matters worse, Fred and George decided to encourage the school to celebrate her birthday. They were once more in the thick of things, waving their hands like some conductor, encouraging their house mates to sing the birthday song for Hermione and they did. The Gryffindors good naturedly complemented them and were singing at the top of their voices.

It was an amazing display of house spirit and it persuaded the other students from other houses to join in by clapping along.

Even the usually stern Professor McGonagall had clapped to the song.

When the singing died down, she spoke with amusement in her voice. "Mr. Potter, I'm sure the House elves wouldn't have minded baking a cake for Miss Granger if you had announced your intentions in advance."

"I didn't mean to make such a big fuss," said Harry, laughing brightly. "I should have realised that giving her present during breakfast was the worst way to keep the celebration private."

Professor McGonagall chuckled lightly in response. Most of their fourth-year schoolmates and their housemates took turns offering well-wishes to Hermione.

I suppose I've to thank Fleur for this public display of affections? Hermione said, through their shared link.

No, you should be thanking Sue. It was her idea. You didn't exactly put the mark on me. I wore the ring myself. Harry pointed out.

Hermione took off his promise ring and immediately slipped it back on.

"Well, now you can't say I haven't," declared Hermione, her eyes twinkling, while she repressed her laughter.

Harry laughed so hard that he nearly fell off his chair, much to his other friends' amusement. The most persistent gossipers had given up after that spontaneous celebration.

There were only about two weeks left until the first task.

His friends began to show signs of worry as the date loomed closer. Hermione seemed to be taking out her anxiety by burying herself in the school library, feverishly searching for useful defensive spells. Harry chose to leave her alone since it was something he couldn't do. The idea of being stuck in the library for weeks, vehemently pouring over books like Hermione did, didn't appeal to him. This was one of the things that Hermione did best and he was contented to leave the task of researching in the dark and cold library in her capable hands.

He was somewhat confident of his own abilities to survive the task if Riddle chose not to interfere. The threat of Riddle hanging over them was stifling since they were helpless as much as clueless. It was difficult to pre-empt any move since they were not clear what Riddle would do. Would he choose to interfere in the first task, manipulating behind the scenes so that Harry would be severely injured, or would he choose to wait? That question remained unanswered. To be on the safe side, Harry decided to work on his spells, together with Cedric, in spare classrooms whenever they had the free time to do so. The uncertainty made some of them very uptight, particularly the Heads of the Ancient Houses and Hermione.

Everyone in Harry's tight circle of friends grew more apprehensive as the first task neared. Their anxiety drove them to work even harder in their battling abilities.

On Thursday, Harry's friends brought up the topic of finding a private place to train.

"We are in desperate need of a place to practice all our spells without having anyone gawking at us," said Susan. "Do you know of any good place to practice, Fred?" They were all having their break.

"Large and private?" asked Fred, "Not at all, I'm afraid."

"I guess we'll have to stick to only physical training and wait for extra lessons with Professor Moody to practice," said Cedric.

"Keep your eyes open," said Daphne. "We might be lucky and stumble across a place."

Harry and Hermione were racking their brains for ideas when suddenly they thought of a possible place.

It might work if we can solve the issue of how to get in and out of there, answered Hermione, plainly excited. The couple stood up suddenly and dashed back to their quarters.

Their friends were completely dumbfounded as they watched Harry and Hermione leave.

"Dobby!" called Harry when he entered his dorm.

He appeared promptly, surprised at the urgency of his tone.

"Yes, my Lord?" Dobby answered calmly.

"Can you take us to the Chamber of Secrets?" asked Harry.

Dobby nodded, since he had accompanied the couple on their last visit and took them straight there.

To their surprise, the Chamber was very clean. Dobby had taken the initiative to clean the area up and install magical lights.

The statue of Slytherin was repaired and he stood in the corner, looking as if he was supporting the high ceiling. Harry and Hermione checked in the smaller rooms and realised that Dobby had done an amazing job cleaning up.

"With appropriate refurbishing, we can use this place to train," announced Harry excitedly, gesturing absently.

"We could do a lot more with it if we wanted to." Hermione replied thoughtfully.

Harry's watch started to beep and he answered the call - it was Cedric.

"We went to your quarters and found it empty? Where are you? Are you still within Hogwarts?"

"We are," answered Harry. "We've found a good place. However, there are several issues to work out before we can start using the place."

"That's fantastic!" said Cedric excitedly. "We'll see you in your quarters soon?"

"Yeah, we'll be there in a bit." Harry assured before he cut off the communication. Hermione was as usual, on top of things, informing Dobby on the way she wanted the place to be renovated. She wanted to convert one of the rooms into a place for them to relax and a library dedicated to physical and magical forms of fighting.

"There is still a problem of access," said Harry, frowning. "Dobby can't take that many of us at a time, and I would hate for him to have to make multiple trips."

"I was just thinking about that, Harry and I've got an idea. Why don't we build another portkey into our watches so that we'll all have direct access to the chamber? It'll take them to and from the chamber easily." Hermione suggested.

"That's brilliant, love!" exclaimed Harry, smiling.

The couple called for Dobby and he popped them back to their quarters where their anxious friends were waiting. They happily announced the good news and collected their watches.

"We are actually going to train in the legendary Chamber of Secrets?" asked Daphne in awe.

Harry shrugged.

"The Basilisk no longer lives in it so it's empty. It fits our purpose once Dobby is done with the renovations," answered Harry. "I believe it'll at least take a week. We'll probably be able to return your watches to you tomorrow."

They went for their afternoon lessons after their morning break ended. In the evening, they met Professor Moody for their first private lesson in the DADA classroom. The teenagers did not know what to expect from their DADA professor despite taking at least two weeks of lessons from him. There was the usual ominous clunk sound that announced his arrival.

"Good evening," growled Professor Moody, looking at them briefly with his normal eye. "I didn't expect such a big lot of you. According to Professor McGonagall, you're quite competent with basic hexes, counter-hexes, offensive, and defensive spells. Stupefy, Diffindo! " He roared suddenly, pointing his wand at one unfortunate student.

His target turned out to be Harry; he summoned a desk to take the blow for him as he ducked. The table exploded when it was connected with the two spells, reducing into splinters. The other teenagers immediately cast the shield charm to protect themselves from the flying fragments while Harry tried to disarm Professor Moody. However, he was that kind who did exactly as he preached and he repelled his effort with a timely "Protego"

"That's enough, Potter," snarled Moody, smiling, his magical eye scanning each one of them. "Constant Vigilance! I see that you've remembered my lesson well. There's not a lot to teach if you're not vigilant. I'm glad to see that you're at least able to conjure a shield quickly. Is it too difficult for you to cast a shield charm, Potter?" asked Moody. Luna repaired the desk immediately with a flick of her wand.

"No, sir," answered Harry promptly.

"Your move was nevertheless effective since it could act as a distraction."

He limped slowly towards the blackboard, keeping both of his eyes on them. "I'm not going to move into advanced spell casting until I'm sure you have what it takes so you're stuck with basic spells. Many wizards and witches fall into the trap of thinking that when it comes to duelling, the fancier the spell the better and they usually lose their life as a result. Never underestimate these spells. Basic spells can be very powerful if you master them and can apply them effectively. They don't take a lot out of the spell caster and the incantation is usually short."

He took a swig from his hip-flash before continuing.

Professor Moody talked about combining several simple spells for greater effect.

"I've used a stunner followed by a cutting spell. This, as you could see by Mr. Potter's demonstration, that it is ineffective. If I had cast the cutting spell before my stunner, I could have stunned Mr. Potter. The sequence of your spells as such, is important. I've got one last advice before you work on your spells, always play to your strength." growled Moody. He then split up the group into pairs to work out on their combination of simple spells.

Moody seemed to be genuinely surprised by the level of agility displayed by the teenagers.

He gave them the rest of the time to work on their combinations as he observed. He told them that they had to be ready with an effective combination before they attended the next lesson and he dismissed them. He tried to catch Cedric unaware by jinxing him but he nimbly dodged the spell.

"I expect as much from a Champion, Diggory," said Moody, hobbling down the corridor.

"Thank you, sir." Cedric answered politely. He bade the professor a good night before catching up with the rest of his friends. The teenagers retired early after such a demanding lesson, except Harry and Hermione.

The white glow of light faded immediately and the couple walked along the winding path that snaked through the beautiful garden to the mansion, hand in hand. Hedwig was flying above them, watching them protectively.

Harry led her to their favourite spot near the river and they lay there, next to each other.

"You've been working too hard lately," said Harry quietly, looking at the stars. "Didn't you say you don't want to be obsessed with Riddle? Then why do you still want to study Necromancy?"

She should have known that he would find out.

"I couldn't even do that. It's in the restricted section," answered Hermione. "To even predict what he's going to do next, we need to know what his exact purpose is. We deduced that he wanted to re-create his body and this ritual or process needs you, so it has to be some dark ritual. By determining the existence of this ritual, we can therefore be more assured of his purpose and his way of achieving his purpose..."

"Ah, but we've already determine that through the conversation he had with Pettigrew. Pettigrew suggested that Voldemort could use a substitute, which implied that he was not out to kill me for revenge. Therefore, we really can conclude that all Riddle really wants is to get his body back." said Harry. "No need to look up for dark rituals to confirm that."

The sound of the flowing waters did nothing to calm her down.

Hermione released a sigh and turned into his embrace. "I really hate all this uncertainty. I'll sleep more soundly when this Tri-wizard Tournament is over. No, when Riddle is properly dead."

Harry chuckled, kissing her head tenderly.

A comfortable silence fell between them as they enjoyed the cool night breeze. It was permanently summer in House, so they could risk lying down on the grass in the night without getting a cold.

Harry was idly trying to guess the names of the constellations in the sky, wondering if Edmund modelled the sky in the House after the real sky from his own time.

His musings caught Hermione's attention. She turned in his arms slightly so that she could see the sky.

"I believe it reflects whatever Edmund wants to show. This is the night sky belonging to a place in the Southern Hemisphere. Carina gives it away. The brightest star is Canopus, together with that cluster of stars, forms Carina, a southern circumpolar constellation," explained Hermione, pointing to a cluster of stars that seemed to form the bottom of the ship.

Harry chuckled lightly. "We live in the Northern Hemisphere, so forgive me for not knowing. I'm more familiar with constellations like Orion since we use those in Astrology. Wait, I think I saw Orion."

"I saw Sirius!" exclaimed Hermione excitedly, pointing to one of the brightest star in the sky. "It's the nose of that cluster of stars that looked like a dog, southeast of Orion's belt. Sirius and those stars form Canis Major. "

The couple spent some time lying on the grass, pointing and tracing the constellations they knew. Harry and Hermione headed into the mansion by the hill to visit Edmund. As usual, he was delighted to see the couple once again.

"A beautiful night, isn't it?" Edmund asked, smiling broadly.

"Yes, a gorgeous summer night from somewhere in the Southern Hemisphere," replied Hermione.

He chortled good-naturally. "Wonderful, I was sure you'd guess it immediately."

"Orion and Carina gave it away." Hermione admitted with a smile. "Does it always reflect the night sky from the Southern Hemisphere?"

"No, it changes. I thought you would've noticed by now," commented Edmund.

"We were usually too tired to do any star-gazing by the time all our trainers were through with us," said Harry. "You can't really blame us for not realizing it."

"Over-enthusiasm on our part, I suppose," said Edmund, chuckling. "You've still got much to learn. Why, you haven't managed to duplicate your wedding band."

"That's because we haven't figured out the materials that best amplifies and directs our magic," Harry replied. "We've been testing a great deal of materials including gold."

Edmund laughed. "Well, best of luck to that. I see you've brought things to work on. I'll talk to you later."

The couple went into their work area to work on their friends' watches while Hedwig headed off for some training from Toll. It took less time for them to craft the Chamber portkey since it was simpler and would be activated immediately with a touch of the button. They returned the new and improved watches to their friends the next day.

Dobby and several house elves from Potter Mansion worked diligently on the Chamber of Secrets. They spared no expense and it took them a week to complete the renovation. Harry and Hermione walked through the area once it was completed. It was completely revamped according to Hermione's request and it looked like the interior of a well-appointed house rather than an underground chamber.

They exited the small and comfortable room that Dobby had taken them to and entered the main Chamber area.

The House elves had split this open space into several different rooms.

Salazar Slytherin's statue still stood by the corner of the Chamber near a huge glass-walled room flanked by spectator stands. Two

large concrete platforms stood on both sides and there were plenty of obstacles in between. It was a large duelling arena designed to challenge their physiques and take their duelling into another height.

By the large entrance of the room, there was a traditional duelling platform for them to have their usual spars. The gym, which was located on the opposite end, was modelled after the gym in the House and the Potter Mansion so that it completely catered to their needs. They could practice their spells on the indestructible dummies or work up a sweat by pumping weights on the machines. Harry was very satisfied since there was enough space for them to have their hand-to-hand defence lessons there.

One of the larger rooms of the Chamber was converted into a beautiful and serene library. Tall wooden shelves, completely filled with books, lined three walls. A large fireplace was built on the last remaining wall and several large comfortable armchairs were placed before it. There were also tables for them to do their homework. In all, it looked very relaxing. They took the liberty of decorating the entire room with warm tapestries. Dobby had even included windows in most of the rooms and they were enchanted to reflect the weather outside, giving them an illusion that they were above the ground when they were really below.

The house elves also took great care designing the toilets. They were stylishly built along the modern lines, with clean shiny ceramic tiles, glittering metal taps, gleaming porcelain toilet seats. Oil painting of fruit bowls beautified the washrooms.

"Great!" exclaimed Harry excitedly when they exited out of the toilets. "They've done a fantastic job. I can't wait to try that large duelling area. Since this is such an immense Chamber, it would be too much of a strain on Dobby if he has to clean it by himself. We just need to find another house elf to maintain this place."

It wasn't going to be easy filling those shoes, thought Harry. He needed to be completely assured of his loyalty to them, for fear of revealing the location.

"I've already looked into it," answered Hermione, smiling. "Dobby and Charles recommended her to me when I spoke with them yesterday and I gave her the job immediately. I'm sure you'll be pleased with her."

Harry was pleased at his wife's efficiency and thoughtfulness. "Who did they recommended?"

Hermione called the house elf immediately and the house elf who had once lectured him on the duties of a servant during Quidditch World Cup final, appeared immediately, bowing deeply.

Harry's eyes widened at the sight of her.

Winky, dressed neatly in uniform that bore the Potter's crest, asked politely, "You called Winky, mistress?"

Hermione winced slightly at her address.

Mistress? She's a bonded slave to the family of Potter? Harry thought in shocked. A flurry of questions filled his mind- when and how did she came into service.

You're right; she's bonded to the Potter family. She has been in our service since she was dismissed. I asked Dobby to fetch her immediately after Sirius shared that Crouch dismissed her. Freedom didn't agree with her at all and it was a pitiful sight. Winky refused to be paid and begged to be bonded. We couldn't convince her otherwise and I didn't want her to remain homeless so I agreed, answered Hermione, a hint of pity in her voice. We did manage to get her to agree to take a day off every week like the other house elves in Potter Mansion.

That must've been difficult for you, answered Harry, sympathetically, putting his arms around her.

Not really, there wasn't much to choose, Hermione answered, smiling.

Harry had always wondered about the elf ever since he heard that Crouch had dismissed her. He was glad that his wife took her in. He

smiled at the house elf. "It's good to see you again, Winky. I'm glad that Hermione assigned you this task. I know you'll do a great job," said Harry gently.

"It is honour for Mistress to ask Winky. Master and Mistress is kind to Winky. Winky is work hard," answered Winky, bowing.

She appeared to be excited that her new master and mistress thought this highly of her, and Harry knew that it was the right decision to select her.

"We'll be heading back to our quarters, see you later, Winky," said Harry. They portkeyed out of the Chamber of Secrets so that they could share the good news with their anxious friends.

Their friends portkeyed into the Chamber from their quarters, anxious to check out their new training grounds. They were delighted to see the state-of-the art machines they could work with and the imposing duelling area. It was decided that they would begin to use the Chambers for their daily training immediately.

A/N: Thank you for , I hope you enjoyed the chapter. As you can tell, Valentine's day did affect my chapter a little. Haha. Anyway, don't worry, it won't be the last of Skeeter or Fleur. I distinctly recalled that one of my earliest reviewers wanted to see Winky to be part of the team, so here she is. As for Cedric, I can't reveal at the moment if he should die in the story, just like in the cannon, so you can only look forward till that chapter on the last task. I guess I should have a lot more chapters before I write about the last task.

Anyway, next up : First task. I was really riled up when I wrote it.

Have a blessed week!

Chapter 31

The first task

Beta-read by Frustr8dwriter

The butterflies fluttering in his stomach refused to leave no matter how hard he tried to distract himself. He idly picked at his food, reluctant to put them in his mouth.

It was finally the first day of October. The excitement in the school had reached a feverish pitch; the students could talk about nothing but the upcoming first task. His only comfort was that his family would be there to watch him. Sirius, Amelia, Oswald, and Remus would be rooting for them.

His hands were trembling and his stomach was queasy. Looking across the table, he saw that Cedric was in similar state - restless and not eating. His plate remained untouched and Daphne was trying to coax him to take some food. Cedric flatly refused, too worried about the upcoming task to even eat.

Hermione gave him a concerned look, leaned closer to him, and whispered, "You really need to eat something, sweetheart."

"I'm not hungry." Harry tersely replied, shoving his plate away.

Would it have been better if I knew what the first task was? He thought, frowning. He had turned immediately down both Hagrid and Fleur's offers to reveal what it was. His admiration for Fleur had increased slightly since she offered to tell him out of a sense of fair play. He knew he was being foolhardy, but he wanted to be honourable. Fleur had already known and he was certain that Krum was in the loop, leaving the two Hogwarts champions completely in the dark.

"It's the decision you made and you shouldn't regret it," interrupted Hermione, responding to his thoughts and subtly pushing the plate closer to him. "Though, I still think that you've chosen not to know plainly for added excitement."

There was a hint of resignation in her voice.

He gave a lopsided smile, amused that his wife knew him so well. He had caught her movement out of the corner of his eyes. For the sake of appeasing his concerned wife, he ate a piece of toast. Hermione flashed a sweet smile, pleased that he had listened to her.

He returned the smile, secretly glad that he was able to stop her from worrying for a little while. No matter how much she tried to hide her fears by keeping impassive, they shared a soul bond and he simply knew that she would fret. After all, she wouldn't be Hermione if she didn't worry herself over him.

The event was taking place that afternoon and the Champions had to assemble immediately after breakfast. He had to be satisfied that they had done all they could to prepare for the first task. His family, especially Hermione, wouldn't let him down if anything went wrong.

It was nearly time for the first task to begin, and Professor Vector came to collect the two restless Champions for the competition. It was then when she betrayed her anxiety, ignoring the audience; Hermione grabbed him by the lapels suddenly and put her lips on his passionately. Harry was completely shell-shocked at her boldness but responded eagerly to her kiss. She translated all her apprehension into one kiss that left him breathless and in a complete daze.

The Weasley twins, for once, did not make any witty comments.

"I'll be safe, I promise," whispered Harry softly, leaning in so that their brows would touch each other. "I won't do anything reckless."

His eyes reflected sincerity and she kissed the corner of his lips chastely.

"I'll be in the stands, watching you," said Hermione, releasing her death grip on him.

I know you'll never fail to keep me safe.

Hermione smiled as she nodded wordlessly. His close friends took turns wishing him good luck. He could tell from their eyes that they were very edgy about the whole tournament. Harry put on a brave front and assured them.

Professor Vector seemed to be a bundle of nerves, no doubt worrying about him like his wife and his friends. She led the two champions out of the Entrance Hall hurriedly, down the flight of stone steps, towards the Forbidden Forest that stood a distance from the castle. Cedric was being unusually quiet and Harry offered him a weak smile.

"You'll be great." Harry assured. "I have faith in your abilities. You were, after all, chosen over some many hopeful Champion-wannabes."

A light smile played on his lips as he answered. "If I can do this, then you'll have nothing much to worry about, Harry. I know you'll ace this task."

That if is that bugger doesn't interfere, he thought darkly.

Cedric's confidence in him was staggering and he offered a warm smile. "Thanks, Ced. Too bad there can't be two winners. As long it's still a Hogwarts win, we can't complain," added Harry as an afterthought, shrugging.

Cedric chortled at his indifferent comment. "I'll hold you to it. Don't complain when I take the Tri-wizard Cup."

Harry's brows furrowed.

"Now now, I'm sure you know that I'll win. After all, I'm still leading you in that little competition we have going on," said Harry sternly, turning away so that Cedric won't see that he was doing his best at repressing his laughter.

"Unless it's a task about flying on a broom and catching a snitch, you might have the advantage, but I doubt it. So, I have an even chance at winning." Cedric returned in faux- arrogance, standing up straight, in a way that reminded Harry of Madame Maxime. They took a look at

each other amused faces and burst out laughing at the ridiculousness of their conversation.

It took a while for them to calm down. By the time they did, they found themselves at the entrance of the large tent that stood by the forest. The Champions could see nothing else but tall trees and the shrubs of the Forbidden forest. "Mr. Bagman is waiting for you inside. He will brief you, along with Mr. Crouch on your first task," explained Professor Vector, stiffly.

"Thank you, Professor." Harry answered, smiling as he followed Cedric up the flight of steps that led into the large tent.

"Good luck, Harry." Professor Vector called in a trembling voice. "Just do your best and you'll be fine. You better not use the competition as a way to skip your next Arithmancy lesson, because I won't allow it. I want to see you in my classroom tomorrow at 10 am sharp."

Harry let out a laugh at her weak attempt to lighten the mood. "I have never missed any of your lessons so I won't miss the upcoming one either. I'll come out of this unharmed, so I plan to see you then."

She smiled and nodded, spun around and hurried away.

The nerves that disappeared for a while returned full-blown when they stepped into the tent. Krum was pacing around the tent, looking more cantankerous than before. Fleur was the epitome of feminine elegance, sitting quiet in one of the wooden chairs provided, obviously lost in thought. Her eyes had gleamed when they fell upon the young Lord. Before she could greet him, Mr. Bagman stepped into her way and greeted them jovially first. "Splendid," he said, rubbing his hands, "The Hogwarts' Champions are finally here. Barty, I believe we can start the briefing for the first task now. I shall head to the stands."

Mr. Crouch nodded. "Welcome to the first task of the Tri-wizard Tournament. It's a task designed to test your courage and your ability to cope in face of danger. Your task is to retrieve the golden egg. In a moment's time, you will put your hand into this purple silk bag and

select obstacle that you'll be facing. Do you have any questions?" Mr. Crouch asked, sternly.

The four champions nodded, unable to open their mouths to speak.

They could hear a large crowd had amassed a short distance from the tent. The fact that their loud and excited buzzing could reach their tent, Harry knew it was about time for the competition to begin. His apprehension grew with each passing second. No, he couldn't go into battle in such a state. He took deep breaths to calm his nerves but it was fruitless.

From Mr. Crouch's expression - all stern and formal – it was time. He took out a purple bag from his pocket and approached the circle of Champions.

Fleur was standing on his left, so he offered it to her first.

"It's time for you to pick your obstacles. Miss Delacour, please reach in and take one," said Mr Crouch politely, offering the bag to her. With a shaking hand, she drew out a tiny model. His eyes nearly bugged out at the sight of a small Welsh Green, a dragon. It had a number 'two' around its long neck. Fleur had anticipated the task and gave a short sigh.

Dragons? Dragons for first task?

His mind went to a hyper-drive. Are they nuts? Fancy transporting full-grown dragons into the school for the task!

Cedric went wide-eyed.

He offered the bag to Krum who was standing next to Fleur and the same held true for Krum. He pulled out a dragon Harry recognised immediately as Chinese Fireball and it had a number 'three' around its neck. He didn't even blink, just stared at the ground.

Mr. Crouch offered the bag to the next champion in line; Cedric. Harry had to nudge Cedric for him to snap out of his musing. Flustered, he hurriedly reached in and withdrew a bluish-grey Swedish Short-Snout.

The number 'one' was tied around its neck. Cedric stared at his model blankly while Crouch finally offered Harry the bag.

He put his hand in, reached for the last dragon in the bag and placed it in his palm so that he could look at it. The dragon he had selected looked fiercer and more powerful than the other dragons the other champions had chosen. Harry immediately recognised it as a Hungarian Horntail. The Hungarian Horntail was staring back at him with its bright yellow eyes, puffing black column of smoke grumpily and it had a number 'four' tied around its neck. Harry noticed that its back was as dangerous as its front since its long tail was filled with rows and rows of sharp spikes.

"The numbers on your dragon represents the order in which you face your task. Mr. Diggory, go to the enclosure when you hear the whistle. I shall be in the stands. Good day," said Mr. Crouch curtly, leaving the tent.

Cedric paced around the small tent, with a frown of concentration on his face. Harry didn't bother him since he knew that he was brainstorming for ideas. He watched Cedric walk up and down the fairly large tent and after a while, a smile slowly made its appearance on his lips.

The whistle went off.

"Good luck," said Harry, pulling him into a brief one-arm hug. Cedric returned the hug, took a deep breath and nodded. His fist clenched tightly over the tiny model of the dragon. He drew the flaps of the tent and headed out into the open to meet the larger and living counterpart of his model.

The crowds went ballistic when the master of ceremony announced his name as Cedric walked past the trees, through a gap in the enclosure fence. He could feel his heart was hammering furiously in his chest as he approached the enclosure.

It was now or never.

The roar of the crowds grew distant as he fixed his eyes on the bluish-grey dragon which was standing a distance away from the nest of eggs. Cedric expelled his wand from his holster and broke into a jog, his eyes never leaving the only obstacle that stood in his way to the egg.

She lifted her long neck, as if she had scented him, and searched the grounds for a possible intruder.

He took a moment to scan his surroundings.

Sunlight gleamed off the surface of the golden egg he had to collect, pin-pointing the exact location of the target. It was lay on top of the white eggs that were speckled with blue. There was plenty of debris scattered around the large enclosure making it perfect for his plan. A fierce smile was on his face as he ran flat out into the enclosure, in full view of the dragon.

He could have laughed at his Gryffindor-like courage but his mind was totally occupied with the dragon.

She let a blood-curling roar as she arched her long neck.

The dragon had finally noticed him, snarling to show her rows of sharp and pointed teeth. The dragon swiftly used her large and powerful body to guard her nest protectively. Cedric ducked when she breathed a long jet of brilliant blue flames at him.

However, he wasn't quick enough. The scorching flames had grazed some of his shoulders slightly and he winced. He tossed himself behind some large jutting rocks and he could hear the dragon roaring in frustration.

Beads of perspiration formed on his brow as he peeped and observed the dragon. She seemed satisfied that he was not inching closer to her nest. It was time to put his plan into action. Cedric hurriedly transfigure some rocks into a herd of large fluffy sheep.

Cedric was certain that sheep was the favourite meal of the dragons and he crossed his fingers, praying hard that his diversion tactic would work.

Bleating wildly, the large herd of fat and frantic sheep dashed haphazardly into the sight of the perching and furious dragon. She emitted another petrifying roar. The frantic sheep dashed towards the other entrance of the enclosure, away from Cedric, the nest and the dragon.

She uncurled herself from her nest and pursued those pesky mouth-watering treats. She lumbered towards the unfortunate sheep, leaving the path between the nest and Cedric clear.

Cedric bolted straight for his prize- the gleaming golden egg.

The crowds stood up and cheered deafeningly.

"Would you look at him go!" bellowed Bagman, his voice vibrating across the stands.

Cedric crossed the large enclosure in record time, without breaking his stride; he bent down and picked up the golden egg. The dragon roared and thrashed around when a few dragon handlers appeared immediately to tame the dragon with stunners. She gave up after a while and was quietly led out of the enclosure.

A smile of triumph was on his lips as he jogged out of the enclosure where Professor Sprouts and Daphne stood there waiting for him.

In the tent, Harry was feeling nervous for his good friend. His hands were clammy from all the anxiety. He couldn't watch the competition so all he could do was to guess from the responses of the crowd and comments.

He knew that his friend was hurt from the commentary and it set him pacing around the room worriedly.

"I think Diggory has got the golden egg!"

He cheered and punched the air when he heard the crowd cheered and applauded loudly for the final time. His actions surprised the other Champions but Harry couldn't care less. Fleur looked slightly green when the whistle went off for the second time.

"Good luck," he said hoarsely when Fleur lifted the flap of the tent.

She spun around and nodded in gratitude. With her head held high and her hand clutching her wand tightly, she left the tent.

Harry rolled his shoulders as he watched Krum pacing around the tent. He closed his eyes and willed himself to tune out the noises and meditate.

There was the usual cheering when Fleur finally appeared at the enclosure to face her dragon. Ten minutes later, she finally retrieved her egg and the crowd went ballistic with cheering.

Krum continued to pace around the tent until the third whistle went off. Harry was so absorbed with his meditation that he did not even notice his surroundings. The tension from his muscles slowly seeped away from him as he focused on his breathing. His mind was completely blank, like a clean piece of parchment and his emotions were calm like still waters.

He was so successful that when he finally cracked his eye open, the final whistle had gone off and it was time for him to enter. He felt abnormally calm as he picked himself up and walked out of the tent into the open.

The fear of the Dark Lord had no hold over him; he thought calmly as he walked along the trees and turned into the gap in the fence. He would face this fight like a true warrior.

Harry touched the Sword of Gryffindor hidden in his pocket and ejected his wand into his palm.

He could hear the dragon roaring and shrieking horribly from a distance.

Thousands and thousands of eyes were upon him as he walked peacefully into the enclosure. They broke into a loud cheer when they finally saw him. Large banners with large pictures of Gryffindor could be seen from the stand. Across him, the Hungarian Horntail was emitting an ear-deafening roar when he finally stood at the enclosure. Her fiery yellow eyes were scanning the area in a twitchy and almost desperate kind of way as her long spiky tail whipped around her, leaving large gouge marks on the hard ground. She stood protectively over her nest, refusing to move a budge. Her long, large and shiny black wings were half-furled.

Harry took a moment to admire his opponent.

The Hungarian Horntail was gorgeous in her own vicious way. Her smooth scales were a glimmering black that caught the light and shimmered whenever she moved beautifully. The hard armour covered every inch of her body, starting from her regal head, down her neck, continuing through her body, all the way to her long powerful tail. Her long tail was filled with long and dangerous white spikes and her long rows of sharp razor-like teeth gleamed in the sun when she snarled loudly and bared her teeth. Her bronze horn glistened in the light.

He recalled a portion of his text that described Hungarian Horntails, especially breeding mothers.

Hungarian Horntails are one of the most vicious and protective breed of dragons ever known to the Wizarding World. They are typically found breeding in the deep forests of Hungary, hence its name. They have shiny black scales that are more resistant to all magic compared to other breeds of dragons. The male Hungarian Horntails are smaller than its counterparts and can be identified by its yellow underbellies. Their long powerful and muscular tails are filled with long and dangerous spikes that leave large grooves whenever they go. They tear up their prey with their long and pointed teeth after breaking their necks with their strong jaws.

The female Hungarian Horntails are particularly notable for being very aggressive when they breeding. The breeding mother would attack, pursue, and kill any intruders in 50-metres radius of her nest with her

long spiky tail or her razor-sharp teeth. When these breeding mothers are on a rampage, it is impossible to stop them until the threat has been eliminated. In the past, many have lost their lives when they accidentally bumped into a wild, breeding mother.

Now he finally understood why Hagrid loved them so much, dragons were really a sight to behold.

There was no fear in his heart when he watched the large, powerful yet desperate dragon protecting her nest with her all. His heart ached with pity.

It was sick just using them for some entertainment. With that thought in mind, he retracted his wand back to his holster.

It was time to treat these intelligent creatures with some respect.

A look of determination crossed his face.

With his back erected straight, he walked confidently towards the fierce dragon unarmed. She tossed her head aggressively and breathed a long spurt of flame at him and Harry leapt aside into safety.

He could have conjured a shield but he chose not to.

The Hungarian Horntail let out a loud roar as she twisted her neck and tried to snap him violently with her teeth. Once again, Harry dodged, rolling out of harm into a crouching position.

She backed up slowly, eyeing him intently and holding her position.

The crowd gasped loudly.

"Relax," said Harry soothingly, approaching her slowly. "I won't hurt you." He held up his hand so that she could see that he was completely unarmed.

The dragon before him was clearly in a rampage.

She didn't seem to have heard him and persisted in driving him away by breathing jets of flames and snapping at him when he was in her reach. However, Harry ducked every one of them agilely and did not draw his wand. If the Hungarian Horntail was unrelenting in her effort to hurt Harry, Harry was even more persistent in not hurting her. It was a complete test of his agility and stamina when he had to rolled, ducked, jumped, and dashed away from the various attacks of the relentless dragon.

When his sleeve caught fire, he put it out by physical means. He was nearly hurt when she swung her tail towards him, leaving gouging large portion of soil where he was standing a scant second ago.

Suddenly, the Hungarian Horntail stopped.

Her eyes lost that fiery edge it used to have when she first set her eyes on him and she had snapped out of her temper. The Hungarian Horntail was no doubt tired and intrigued. To the surprise of the crowd, she started sniffing at him. She let out a puff of black smoke from her nostrils as she fixed one of her large yellow eyes on him.

I'm convinced. Why then, two-legged, are you so determined in going to my nest if you don't plan to steal or hurt my eggs? How would I even know if you wouldn't hurt my eggs?

"The same way I haven't tried to hurt you," answered Harry, gently, brushing some of the dirt of his clothes. "I'm not going to hurt your eggs. I'm trying to remove something in your nest that isn't your eggs."

A foreign object?

She turned away from him to sniff her nest. Her sharp turn had sent her tail swing careless towards Harry and it would have hit him if Harry did not crouch at the last second. The Hungarian Horntail hovered over the nest, bent down and picked something up with her mouth. It was only when she set the thing in front of him, did he realise it was the golden egg he was suppose to retrieve.

I didn't check my nest after they forced me into this enclosure. Is this what you're looking for?

"Yes, thank you," said Harry, bowing after he picked up the golden egg. He lifted his hand to stop them when he saw the dragon handlers running forward with their wands out to force her back to her enclosure. "She will go back to the enclosure without help," said Harry. Turning to the dragon, he said, "I think it's time to go back to the pen."

She fixed her eye on him again, no doubt amazed.

Thank you, Two-legged. You're interesting. I've never met a two-legged who is brave enough to stand up against us without being armed and treat us like an equal.

"Um... thanks?" Harry answered sheepishly.

She lowered her head and licked him with her rough and forked tongue before turning away to collect her nest of eggs.

With dignity, the dragon carried her nest with her mouth and walked into her pen, leaving the dragon keepers completely dumbstruck.

Harry finally took out his wand and cleaned himself up.

"All in a day's work," muttered Harry tiredly as he jogged to the entrance of the enclosure, with the golden egg under his arm.

Bagman's voice boomed across the place.

"WOW! DID YOU SEE THAT? I can't believe it. The youngest champion managed to coax the dragon to give him his golden egg. It's not against the rules, but I never thought anyone could actually tame a Hungarian Horntail. The youngest champion took the shortest time to get his egg. "

His family was there, along with Professor Vector, watching him with astonishment in their eyes.

"I didn't know you could speak to dragons!" exclaimed Sirius excitedly, grabbing him around the head and ruffling his hair. For once, Amelia did not stop him.

"That was amazing!" Remus said, smiling. "You're definitely a true Potter and Gryffindor, putting your life at risk to make such a bold statement."

"Yeh did it! Wonderful!" Hagrid congratulated, slapping his back. "Got me a little worried when yeh turned me down. I'm glad yeh did it without hurting the dragon."

"That was wonderful. I thought Cedric did a good job but you did better," praised Oswald, smiling warmly at him. It had been quite some time since he last saw Lord Greengrass. All he knew was that he was busy working on an important top-secret project that took up a lot of his time and resources.

His smile widened.

He let out a sigh of relief, glad that it was finally over while his family continued to fuss over him.

"Well done, Harry," bade Amelia, smiling at him. Harry noticed that a bubblegum pink-haired and petite girl was standing at the corner, watching them closely. She could have passed off as a student if she had chosen to wear a uniform. Harry was certain he might have seen her before. He was distracted when his eyes finally fell on his wife - Hermione was standing behind Oswald, half-hidden in his shadow.

"Mione," said Harry hoarsely, wrapping his arms around her tightly. Her feelings started pouring back into him as if the gates of the flood date had opened. He could sense her relief, her anxiety, her frustration, her joy, and her pride.

Her eyes narrowed slightly.

"I was very worried, watching you face the dragon unarmed. How could you do such a reckless thing, Harry James Potter?" She demanded angrily, hitting him on the chest.

He noticed that the skin of her bottom lip was broken from all the anxious nibbling and he let out a huskily laugh, rubbing the pad of his thumb over her abused lip. There were fingernail marks on her face where she was clutching it in fear.

"I'm sorry," offered Harry, stroking her cheeks lovingly.

His actions brought his partly burnt sleeve into view and her anger was replaced with concern immediately.

She lifted up his slightly scorched sleeve and checked his arm and was glad that he wasn't injured. His family started talking amongst themselves, giving the couple some time alone.

"How's Cedric?" Harry asked worriedly as she led him by the hand back to the edge of the enclosure to get his marks.

"His shoulders were slightly burnt. I think it was a second-degree burn, nothing Madam Pomfrey couldn't fix," answered Hermione. "Cedric sparked a change in Daph that I never thought I would see. She actually dashed straight to the enclosure to wait for him when his task was over. I've never seen her so worried."

Harry laughed at her comment. Hermione took the time to briefly update him on all the champions. Fleur and Krum were completely unharmed, choosing to put the dragon into a deep sleep and using a spell on its eyes.

"Krum was cautious, using a simple spell that exploited the weakness of the dragon," commented Harry absently.

"Both of you have done spectacularly, taking account that neither of you knew about the task," said Hermione, watching him.

"It doesn't matter - I'm just happy the task is over, and I'm not on my way to the Hospital wing." Harry commented offhandedly, staring at the stands.

He could see that the five judges were sitting on a raised seats draped in gold, in full view of the arena. They appeared to be heatedly discussing the allocation of his marks.

"This whole task is sick," began Harry, looking distant. "Dragons are already an endangered species and we're using them like some circus animals, even encouraging other students to harm them. What happens if we actually squashed those eggs? I don't think taking points off would ever make up for the loss of new dragons."

Hermione nodded. There were truth in his words- Krum accidentally destroyed the nest full of eggs when his dragon was lumbering around in pain.

"We could bring it up to the committee as a formal protest." Hermione suggested. "Is that why you chose not to hurt it?"

Harry smiled and looked at her. "She's a mother, desperate to protect her unborn younglings after being prodded and hurt by us. It's understandable that she would attack, so I couldn't bring myself to hurt her," answered Harry, thinking of his own mother who had died to protect him. "Anyway, she isn't unreasonable. When she realised I wasn't out to harm her or take her eggs, she relented."

"Because of your actions, people will see dragons in a new light. They now know that dragons react out of a need to defend themselves instead of just being senseless, aggressive creatures. I'm proud of you, sweetheart." Hermione announced, her heart swelling with pride. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him passionately.

He put his arms around her and returned the kiss with equal fervour, tuning out everything but the feel of her in his arms, the sensations she evoked with her touch and her kiss. He ignored the marks that the judges had given him or the loud applause and cheering that accompanied it.

All that didn't matter to him, only she did.

"You're in first place!" announced Charlie Weasley as he dashed up to meet them after his marks were announced. Since the Harry and Hermione were pre-occupied, it was news to them. Despite the fallout with Ron last year, he was glad that most of his relationships with the other Weasleys had endured. His relationship with Mr. Weasley, Bill, Charlie, the Weasley twins, and Ginny remained more or less intact. "Hi, Hermione, it's nice to see you again."

"You too, Charlie." Hermione returned with a warm smile.

"It was unbelievable," Charlie went on, "how you handled the Hungarian Horntail. You should consider being a dragon keeper, Harry, since you're so good with them. Oh yeah, they asked me to tell you to hang around for a few minutes, Bagman wants a word with all the champions back at the Champion's tent."

"Thanks for passing on the message. Being Head of an Ancient House is a full time job, so I doubt I will be able to even consider another line of work." said Harry, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

"What a waste!" Charlie exclaimed with equal parts of dismay and amusement. "We'll have to catch up soon, maybe go for a drink? Anyway, I need to run. I'll see you two later."

They exchanged good-byes. Afterwards, Charlie then joined the large crowds swarming back to the castle and disappeared out of sight. Harry and Hermione leisurely made their way to the Champion's tent, glad that nothing extraordinary happened in the first task. They met Fleur, Cedric, and Krum outside the large Champion's tent.

Krum grinned when he saw Hermione. To Harry's surprise, she returned it as if they knew each other.

"That was good work, Krum," commented Hermione, smiling.

"Viktor please, Hermy-own." he insisted with a thick Bulgarian brogue, frowning at the formality of her tone.

"Her-my-oh-nee," She repeated, her eyes narrowing slightly at the way he butchered her name.

To his surprise, the Bulgarian seeker smiled in amusement, dipped into a bow and apologised with his thick Bulgarian accent.

Anger coursed through his blood as he watched them. The grumpy Quidditch star obviously was besotted with his wife! A flurry of questions flooded his mind: Why did Hermione kept him in the dark? How did they meet? How long have they known each other? His eyes narrowed in anger and he stepped protectively between them like an overzealous lover. Before Hermione could explain, Fleur interrupted.

"So zis is ze 'ermione?" Fleur questioned haughtily, tossing her long sheet of silvery blonde hair and looking at her as if she was trying to measure her up.

Harry put an arm around Hermione's waist possessively. "Yes, Fleur. This is the love of my life, Hermione Granger. Mione, meet Fleur."

"It's nice to finally meet you, Fleur." Hermione said politely, extending her hand. Harry could tell that she was forcing herself to be friendly so as to make things less awkward.

"Pleasure to meet you," Fleur said coolly, ignoring her offered hand of friendship. Turning to Harry and disregarding her, Fleur said, "You did well, 'arry. I cannot believe zat you entered wizzout a wand." She clutched his arm with admiration.

Harry politely disengaged his arm from her grasp, frowning. Krum's brows contracted at the sight.

Oh no, thought Cedric, watching the four of them closely.

The tension between them rocketed to unprecedented level.

Krum was furious that Harry put Hermione into such an uncomfortable position and was jealous of Harry.

Harry, on the other hand, was irritated with Fleur for treating Hermione shabbily and jealous that Krum seemed to be so defensive of her.

How could things get so complex?

Cedric would have laughed at the sight of Harry being so unusually territorial of his lover if things didn't look as if it were getting out of hand.

Before any of them could speak up, Cedric stepped in.

"I think Mr. Bagman will be here any minute," interrupted Cedric pleasantly, smiling. He held up the flap of the tent for them to enter.

Harry turned to Hermione, leaned in, and kissed her ardently on her lips "Please wait for me here, Mione," whispered Harry huskily. Hermione nodded absently, her eyes wide-open with shock at the display of passion. He shot an evil smirk in the direction of Krum, before walking past him into the tent. The other two champions were irritated for utterly different reasons - Fleur was glaring at Hermione, not pleased that Harry had ignored her for Hermione while Krum was glowering at Harry.

Cedric sighed.

The three champions entered the tent together. The whole atmosphere was chilly when Harry and Krum stared at each other eye to eye, unblinking and unsmiling.

Krum's face was tight and bitter as he glared at him.

Harry wore a defiant expression on his face, as if daring Krum to do his worst.

Cedric put a hand on Harry's shoulder, catching his attention and leading him away before they actually fought over Hermione.

"Relax, you did a brilliant job," said Cedric, smiling. Krum slouched away, with a belligerent look on his face. Harry's face immediately broke into a grin when he saw Cedric. "Good job, as well. Hermione told me all about it. Excellent use of transfiguration," said Harry, putting a hand on his shoulders.

"You did a much better job. After all, the dragon practically handed you your egg." Cedric returned, slapping his back. Harry chuckled. "Why is it that things involving you are always so complex?" asked Cedric quietly.

Harry seemed baffled by his words but before he could ask Cedric to clarify, Bagman had bounced into the tent.

"Well done, all of you," said Bagman excitedly, with a large smile on his face. "You'll have a long nice break before your second task. It will take place in the morning of January the fourth at nine-thirty. You will need to solve how to access the clue provided by the golden egg because it will tell you all about your next task. Everyone clear? Great! Good luck! Now, off you go." Bagman dismissed them and the champions headed out.

"Do you know that Krum and Hermione are friends?" asked Harry as he fell into step with Cedric.

"No, I was as surprised as you to see them being so friendly to each other. Harry, if you didn't even know about it, what made you think I would? You and Hermione are usually together," said Cedric, amused.

"Not really. Ever since I was made champion, we've been spending our spare time apart. She'd be in the library and I'd be with you, training," replied Harry, frowning.

"Scratch that, you spend the most time with her," rectified Cedric. "I know you're worried about the whole thing between Hermione and Krum. Why don't you just talk to her? Only Hermione can provide you with the answers you need, Harry." Cedric advised sagaciously.

Harry nodded and kept his silence until they rejoined Hermione. They were surprised to see Daphne with her, chatting quietly. Cedric smiled when he saw his girlfriend and pecked her forehead chastely. There was a light crease on Hermione's brow; she seemed to be contemplating and he could not tell what was on her mind since she put up a mental block.

He offered his hand and she took it quietly. Cedric and Daphne exchanged looks at their unusual behaviour but made no mention of it. Hand in hand, the couples made their way back to Hogwarts Castle, to Harry's and Hermione's marriage quarters where everyone was waiting for them.

Harry and Hermione looked as if they were lost in their own world.

They walked past the Black lake where the large Durmstrang ship was anchored. Durmstrang students were seen entering and leaving the ship.

"Ced and Daph, why don't you go on ahead? I need to speak to Hermione," said Harry suddenly, stopping.

Their friends looked at both of them and noticed the determined expression on Harry's face. Casting a final worried look at them, they head towards the castle.

Wordlessly, Harry led her to her favourite spot in the grounds - the lone tree by the Black lake.

Harry paced up and down, trying to find the words to speak.

"What's up with you and Krum?" asked Harry, furiously, spinning around to look at Hermione. "Why haven't you told me that you've gotten chummy with him?"

"Look, Harry. I didn't think it was important enough mention," said Hermione, brushing the lone strand of hair away from her forehead. "We met in the library. It's his favourite haunt after he was selected Champion. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement for him to sit at my table to avoid the giggly girls while I maintained my peace and quiet as I did my research."

"So he always shares a table with you in the library?" demanded Harry. Hermione frowned at his tone; she turned around and walked away from him, to the side of the Black lake.

Harry determined to get his answer, followed her.

"Yes, it shuts those fan girls that are in the library to ogle him. Our conversations are limited. I think besides exchanging our names, we haven't talked much," snapped Hermione, glaring at him.

Harry could feel his anger ebbing away when her reason hit home. Harry could tell why Hermione didn't think it was significant for her to bring him up.

"I don't have to report to you who I chose to be friends with, Harry." Hermione shot and his jaw tightened visibly at her retort. "Besides, what do you think was between us?" asked Hermione dangerously. Harry knew that he was treading on treacherous grounds by insinuating that she and Krum were more than friends.

Silence fell between them. He finally saw reason and realised that there was no cause for his anger.

There was no anger in his voice when he spoke.

"He likes you," Harry explained, drawing his hand through his hair absently, his tone softening, betraying his insecurity. "Didn't you see the way he became possessive when Fleur slighted you?"

"Well, Fleur likes you." Hermione returned with frustration. "I don't get all worked up over her. I don't get it why you're so uptight about Viktor unless you think that I'm just attracted to people with reputation and wealth."

"No," replied Harry sharply, grabbing her arms so that she would look into his eyes and see the truth in his words. "I don't see you that way, Mione," declared Harry solemnly. Suddenly, the fire in his eyes was gone and he let go of her, turning away. Hermione had half a mind to grab him and force him to speak about his feelings but she stopped when he continued in a quiet voice, "I think you're attracted to people who are reckless and passionate. Besides, he's the first Quidditch player that I have ever heard you singing praises of. You, a person who hates Quidditch. I mean you even spoke of him excitedly the first time I ever heard you talk about Quidditch."

Despite the years, there was always the battered boy with low self-esteem lurking somewhere within him and this was one of those moments.

His answer was so hilarious, Hermione couldn't help but laugh.

Harry was taken aback by her display of insensitivity and he turned away from her.

"Sweetheart, let me re-phrase that." Hermione said gently, a bit guilty that she'd inadvertently hurt his feelings. "You're jealous because you think he was significant enough to make me accept Quidditch?" she questioned incredulously.

Harry nodded.

"Nothing could be further from the truth." Hermione admitted. "Silly, he isn't the first Quidditch player I've sung praises about. That person is you," said Hermione. "I'm glad that at least you remember that I hate Quidditch. What do you think motivates me to play it in my spare time despite my dislike? It's because of you, love. I still hate flying, but I do that because I want to know what draws you to the sport. I can bear with it because each time that I play, it puts a smile on your face. So, Harry, it isn't Viktor that makes me tolerate Quidditch, it's you."

Harry gaped and lost his ability to speak momentarily.

Her tone grew gentle and assuring and her eyes gleamed with passion. "There is absolutely no need to worry about him. I'm not at all attracted to him. If you think that I'm attracted to people who are reckless, the first task should have shown that he's not even close. He played it safe by manipulating the weakness of dragons while you went armed with nothing but your courage. No one could ever be more reckless than you, sweetheart. Just like there isn't anyone in this world who is braver than you."

It made him feel so stupid. It wasn't the first time she had admirers. A large number of schoolmates harboured an infatuation for her and he

didn't mind. He wasn't even jealous when he spotted Ray, her first love, and her together at the ice-skating rink.

"I'm sorry, Mione." Harry finally said. "I guess I'm just being really stupid," said Harry, scratching the back of his neck.

"Not stupid, love, just insecure. I know we've been busy but it doesn't change the fact that I love you, Harry," replied Hermione ardently.

Harry smiled and expressed his love for her in actions - he leaned forward and captured her lips in a soft, melting kiss that made her toes curl.

Hermione laid her cheek on his chest, listening to the steady thumping of his heart and enjoying the serenity of being in his arms.

He heaved a sigh of relief, glad that the heavy weight had been lifted from his heart.

They spend some time watching the spectacular view of the castle, unmarred by the Durmstrang ship.

"We need to head back. I'm sure they'll be worried," reminded Harry, releasing her so that he could hold her hand and make their way back into the castle. "I noticed that we've had several disagreements this year."

"It's actually good," said Hermione, surprising him. "It shows that we're talking to each other and are being open about the issues that are bothering us. There were times in the past when you kept your mouth shut and let what was bothering you eat you up inside if I didn't pry it out of you."

Harry laughed and kissed her head gently. "I'm glad that you always make sure it didn't fester. It's been a long time since I felt jealous."

Hermione smiled at the memory. "Yes, I remember the first time. You were jealous of yourself."

Harry chuckled loudly. "Well, I've drastically improved. I'm jealous of others."

Hermione shook her head in amusement. "It's silly of you to feel that way, so don't make it a habit. I love you, no one else."

Their friends appeared to be very worried that they were gone for such a long time. Cedric had no doubt updated the group since he witnessed everything but none of them brought it up. Harry was greeted with enthusiastic hugs from Luna and Susan at the door. Their friends fussed over his spectacular face-off with the Hungarian Horntail and begged him to share his experience with the dragon. Harry and Hermione appeared to be in sync again, like always, as Harry shared his side of the tale. It was clear that the couple had worked out their issues, and everyone relaxed.

It had been such a long while since they'd seen one another that everyone stayed to have dinner together. They couldn't remember the last time they'd been that relaxed. It was as if the heavy black clouded hanging over their heads had finally disappeared. It was a night where they could forget about the uncertainty that was around them. Instead, they could celebrate their victories, their friendships, and their family.

It was loud and boisterous reunion. They raised their glasses to the Champions and feasted. The conversations revolved around school and the Tri-wizard competition. Hermione and Daphne spearheaded the conversation about the cruelty of their treatment of magical creatures. They had convinced most of the table, especially the four Heads of Ancient Houses to raise a petition to the Ministry about the abuse of dragons in Tri-wizard competition.

"Who was that lady with shocking pink hair?" Harry asked Amelia.

She seemed surprised that Harry had actually noticed her. "That's Auror Nymphadora Tonks. I have assigned her to help me with my ongoing investigation." Amelia replied. "You'll be seeing her very often."

"She looks really young. Is she fresh out of Auror training program?" questioned Harry curiously.

"Yes, she was in the first batch that graduated from the modified training scheme. She is also Alastor Moody's protégé. She has tremendous potential and she's already made a binding magical contract with me to keep the investigation confidential as an extra precaution. She is also Sirius' cousin."

"Tonks? Ah, yes, she's my cousin. Her grandfather is my mother's brother. I hadn't seen her for ages since her mother, Andromeda – my favourite cousin, married a Muggle-born wizard named Ted Tonks." Sirius interjected, sipping his wine. "My mother frowned upon such marriages so she banished them out of the Black family."

"I see," said Harry. Sirius had mentioned what a stickler his mother had been for such tradition. He was the eldest son, but growing up, he was not made heir to the Black family because they reckoned he wasn't a true Black – sorted into Gryffindor instead of Slytherin.

"The late Lady Black was a nit-picky about such things." Oswald concurred, looking at Harry. "I think your grandmother, the late Lady Potter tried to persuade Walburga to take Andromeda back but it failed. I believe your father and mother took it upon themselves to give her a sum of money monthly to support her during those hard times. Amelia took over the duty when they passed away and funded her education."

"So they're family too?"

"I consider them family," answered Sirius simply. "I would have given her an allowance every month if I wasn't in Azkaban. I'm persuading Ted, Andromeda, and Tonks to live with me."

"Wouldn't they feel out of place, after all, Uncle Moony and you are the only ones living in the house?" asked Hermione.

"Well, they're family. I don't like seeing them living outside the Wizarding world – they have as much right to the Black ancestral home as I do. Plus, they refuse accept a single cent from me since

Nymphadora has become an Auror," said Sirius, scratching his head. "Andromeda is usually alone since both Ted and Nymphadora are so busy with work. If they live with me, Moony and I will be around to keep her company. We have very flexible schedule after all."

"Good luck on it," answered Harry, smiling.

There was some good-nature jibbing around the dining table.

"When are you two love-bugs going to marry?" asked Oswald, putting Sirius and Amelia on the spot. "You're not getting any younger."

"We've more important things than marriage at this point of time," said Sirius.

"Well, there is a lot to do at the Ministry. I can't tear myself off my duties as Head of Bones and Head of DMLE to get hitched," said Amelia.

"Auntie, that's such a lousy excuse. Getting married is one of the duties of the Head of House. Besides, you could hand over some of the duties to me since I'm the heir to the House of Bones. There is really no reason stopping either of you from marrying," protested Susan.

"Yeah, especially when you're the last male Black," added Remus, smiling. "Producing a legitimate heir is important, Padfoot."

There was some good-natured chuckling as Amelia blushed.

"Moony! I'm shocked," exclaimed Sirius.

"Yeah, the Blacks need an heir. Producing an heir for the family is the most important duty of the Head of the House," added Daphne nonchalantly.

Sirius held up his hand and the table became silenced. "We will be married when we feel it's the right time."

"Haven't you heard that there is no better time than now? You wouldn't know what might happen to you the next hour." asked Hermione, taking out her promise ring and enlarging it. "You can make do with this." She put the Celtic knot ring into Sirius's hand.

"Propose to her, Padfoot," encouraged Remus, smirking.

Sirius's mouth had run dry at the sight of the ring in his palm.

"Don't you think that a proposal should be done in private?" Sirius asked, trying to think of a way to slither out of the situation.

"Just propose to her, godfather, unless you don't have the guts," challenged Harry, with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

Sirius frowned and returned the ring back to Hermione.

The teenagers in the room started booing him and Sirius held up his hand.

"Thanks Hermione, I don't need a ring because I already have one." Sirius insisted, withdrawing a small velvet box from his pocket. Sirius had been carrying the ring around for quite some time, looking for the right moment to propose to her.

He conjured nine dozen beautiful red roses, knelt in front of Amelia solemnly, and popped the question.

Amelia gasped at the sight of the roses and the beautiful engagement ring nestled in the box. The large princess-cut diamond was framed by a cluster of rubies in an exquisite and intricate design.

"Say yes!" they chanted as they watched her emotions playing on her face.

Sirius was watching her hopefully, waiting for her answer.

The shock was replaced by joy and finally she nodded.

With a large smile on his face, he took out the ring and slid it into her ring finger. Sirius took her in his arms excitedly and gave her a kiss.

The room exploded with cheering. Some of them started shooting confetti in the room as they congratulated the newly-engaged couple. Amelia was blushing as she received the good wishes of her family and friends.

"Finally!" Remus exclaimed as he slapped his friend's back.

"Oh, I'll be waiting for your good news as well," said Sirius, with laughing gravity.

Everyone just couldn't stop smiling at the thought of them finally getting engaged. Excited, they chased the couple into Harry's study so that they could send in their letter to the Daily Prophet to announce their engagement.

"I'm going to be teased badly when I go into the Ministry tomorrow," said Amelia, shaking her head. Sirius laughed as he put an arm around her waist.

"I doubt it, I'm sure they have all been expecting this." Sirius assured, smiling. "The Daily Prophet has been featuring us frequently lately."

"Well, at least it wasn't fabricated," quipped Luna, smiling.

"Thanks, Sirius. It's going to take the heat off of the Tri-wizard Tournament too," added Harry, smirking.

"Why you little snake," said Sirius, grabbing Harry's head so that he could mess up his hair. They laughed boisterously at the friendly exchange. Everyone could see that Harry was proud that Sirius was finally going to have the family he deserved.

When dinner was finally over, the two champions decided to open one of the heavy golden eggs after much prompting by their friends and family.

"I thought that the Champions are supposed to work on the clues themselves," lightly admonished Amelia, smiling. "However, let's have a look see what the second task might be about."

Cedric offered to use his. He dug his fingernails into the groove that ran around the heavy golden egg and prised it open.

There was a loud shrieking and wailing sound and all of them jammed their fingers into their ears. Cedric immediately snapped it shut almost immediately. Everyone looked visibly shaken by the ear-splitting screeching.

"Wow, that was loud!" Neville commented.

"It sounded as if they were being tortured," offered George, shuddering visibly.

"You don't think you'll have to face a horde of screaming banshee, do you?" Fred asked, looking around.

"No, I don't think so. It's supposed to provide you with the clue about your second task. It's probably a message," replied Harry aloud. He was thinking of a useful machine in the House he could use to test its frequency to prove this theory. If it was a message, the screaming would have varied pitches.

It was puzzling and none of them had any idea how to get the clue.

Cedric and Susan had to head back early since there was a celebration planned in the Hufflepuff's common room.

"It's time to go for your surprise party too," said Fred. Fred grabbed Harry around his waist and tossed him over his shoulder in a fireman's carry and carried him to the Gryffindor common where everyone was waiting for them. Neville and Hermione hurriedly bade the remaining adults goodbye as they followed the Twins and Harry downstairs into the Gryffindor dormitory.

The room exploded in cheers and yells.

Someone had gone to the kitchens to nick food for the party and every surface was filled with Butterbeer and snacks of all varieties. Dean Thomas had put up some impressive new banners of Harry facing Hungarian Horntail. Harry stood up and grabbed six bottles of Butterbeer and passed them to his friends. Looking around, he noticed that Luna, Neville and Hermione looked very happy as they participated in the small conversations that were drifting around in the room. The impromptu celebration of Sirius and Amelia's engagement had cheered them up considerably. Harry felt like a cheerful idiot, grinning most of the time. They laughed easily and gaily at all the jokes.

He entertained his friends' questions about his ability to speak to dragons and his experience facing a dragon unarmed. Harry lost count of the number of times he has to retell his experience with Hungarian Horntail, but he didn't mind. It was a time to mingle, chat, and act like a real fourteen year-old teenager.

He even joined the Weasley twins in pranking some of his housemates. The Weasley twins, as usual, added to the atmosphere with their newest joke products and took the opportunity to sell their products to their fellow housemates.

Everyone was in a very good mood, partying until it was one in the morning.

Harry and Hermione didn't bother undressing and collapsed into their large comfortable bed, totally exhausted from the activities of the day. Before Harry fell asleep, he carefully placed the sleeping model of the Hungarian Horntail on the bedside stand, groggily reminding himself he had to visit her one last time before she was transported back to the reserve.

A/N: Hi everyone, thanks for reading. This is my take of the first task. I hope you like it. Thank you for all the reviews. Have a blessed week.

Chapter 32 :The Unforeseen Task

Beta-read by Frustr8dwriter

Many thanks to Cherub and Inheritance Lover for his suggestions.

The announcement of Sirius and Amelia's engagement made the headlines the next day, taking precedence over the article on the first task of the Tri-wizard Tournament. News about the marriages of the members of Most Ancient and Noble Houses always made headlines, especially the joining of two such Heads. Harry skipped the announcement, which took the entire page, since he was there when it was composed. He flipped past the pages that briefly described the couple's dating history and their extensive portfolios to the page where the article about the first task was. Harry was very satisfied with the article - it was about half a page in length and only stated bare facts of the first task.

He was glad that Skeeter had chosen to heed the warning. Harry set his paper down and glanced around the table where he was sitting. All of his friends had long finished their breakfast. The girls were chatting excitedly among themselves. Neville and Cedric were listening to their conversation keenly, amused. The Weasley twins were busy with their own private discussion.

Things resembled the days before the tournament began - they were far more at ease.

His gaze fell upon a girl with long and straight black hair who was boldly voicing her opinion. It had been a little over a month since the beginning of the term and Cho was not as withdrawn as before. She was actively participating in conversations more frequently since she had begun the process of overcoming her grief. However, she was still different. The death of her parents had altered her personality – she was more sombre and mature. She had finally accepted Cedric's relationship with Daphne.

Harry smiled. The girls were, at the moment, concerned about Sirius and Amelia, trying to think of ways to encourage them to set their wedding date. Harry couldn't help but pity the couple enormously – he'd heard some of the suggestions they were given.

Susan caught his eye and leaned closer to him.

"I heard that you and Hermione had a disagreement yesterday," said Susan quietly.

How could he forget? He had acted like a possessive and jealous husband and quarreled with his wife just the day before.

He arched a brow, surprised that she would bring it up.

"Yes, we did," answered Harry, rubbing the back of his neck uncomfortably - he preferred to keep things between Hermione and him between themselves.

"Well, we were concerned because you two hardly bicker. If it was about Krum, then you really don't have to worry. Occasionally, I join Hermione in the library to keep her company. Krum usually keeps to himself even though we sit at the same table." Susan explained.

"We do have moments when we don't see eye to eye occasionally, but it's usually behind closed doors. Anyway, it's plain stupidity on my part. Hermione explained the situation to me and we are great now. Thanks for caring enough to ask about it. I know you're very busy with planning Aunt Am's wedding." Harry said, his eyes twinkling with sincerity.

Susan returned a friendly smile, patted him on the hand. She turned away from him and focused on the discussion.

Harry smiled, grateful that he had such a wonderful friend in Susan.

He looked across the table and saw that Hermione was very engrossed in her conversation. There was a light crease on her brow as she mulled over the issues very carefully. Harry chuckled inwardly.

He decided not to bother her and excused himself quietly so that he could attend to his duties as Head of the House.

He headed upstairs, towards the quarters, ignoring the students he'd walked past. After the first task yesterday, Harry was being hailed like some sort of hero. He caught some of the murmurings of the other students while he walked along the corridor and rolled his eyes at the audacity of the gossip -most of them thought of him as a great wizard with the power to even control dragons. Harry refrained from correcting them. It was respect, understanding, and a little help from Edmund that helped him to accomplish the task.

All the students could talk about was power. Haven't they considered appreciating and respecting other magical creatures? Harry thought impatiently, tuning out the gossip. Besides, Cedric did a pretty impressive job as well. He continued wistfully, scaling the stairs quickly by taking two steps at a time.

Harry heard someone calling him as he turned into the third level. To his surprise, it was Professor Dumbledore. "Good morning, Mr. Potter. Do you have time to spare? I wish to speak to you," said the elderly Professor gravely.

Harry searched the ex-headmaster's face and saw that he was being unusually serious; he nodded and followed him to his office.

It had been a while since he had entered in Dumbledore's office - Harry preferred to keep their contact with each other to a minimum. Fawkes, the fiery phoenix, was perched magnificently on a large metal stand, watching him. He burst into a sweet and delighted song when he saw him.

Harry grinned - the song of the phoenix never failed to make him feel at peace.

He reached out and stroked his head. The smile on Harry's face widened when he realised that Fawkes enjoyed his touch.

"Would you like to have some tea?" Dumbledore offered suddenly.

The voice of his ex-headmaster reminded him that he wasn't here to play with the Phoenix.

"No, thank you." Harry politely replied, his face suddenly cleared of all emotions as he watched the professor warily.

Professor Dumbledore sat in his chair in a resigned manner, sensing Harry's apprehension from his formal manner. Harry might have forgiven him but he still didn't trust him.

He took a seat in front of the desk and continued to eye the elderly professor with suspicion.

"This isn't about academics, is it Professor?" concluded Harry, leaning into his seat.

A small smile appeared on Dumbledore's face.

"Good deduction, Lord Gryffindor. No, it is not. I know I'm overstepping the boundaries that you have set but because of the unbreakable vow I've made with Lord Black to protect you, I have little choice." Professor Dumbledore returned.

"Please explain, Professor," said Harry courteously, his face blank.

Professor Dumbledore tipped his spectacles in frustration. He spent decades observing and understanding people, but he couldn't tell what the young Lord was thinking.

"First, you might think it was very brave of you to enter an enclosure and face a dragon unarmed, however it was simply folly and arrogance. I'm sure that you know that you're in danger since you've requested Lady Bones to investigate the event that led you to become the fourth champion. As such, you'll have to act with more caution."

His brows furrowed but he held his tongue, knowing that the Professor was right.

"Second, Lord Voldemort is getting stronger. I've been informed that the dark mark is gradually darkening, signifying that he's steadily gaining strength. He will no doubt go after you, the person who caused his downfall. Personally, I don't think it is coincidence that you're competing in the Tri-wizard Tournament while he's on the rise. I'm now beseeching you to treat all tasks with more care and less recklessness. It is not clear what he will do, so you'll have to do everything with caution," said Dumbledore gravely.

"How do you know about the dark mark?" asked Harry curiously, leaning forward.

"I have my sources," replied Dumbledore simply. "I can't betray their confidence."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. He knew that Professor Dumbledore was telling him the truth because of the unbreakable vow.

"Has he been working for you since the last war?" asked Harry, watching the Professor.

"Yes," answered Dumbledore honestly, not at all surprised that he would ask. "I don't question his loyalty to me."

Dumbledore's complete faith in his source would have to be sufficient to Harry for the moment.

"Do you know anything about Riddle's moves?" Harry persisted.

"Unfortunately, I don't. He's keeping quiet," said Dumbledore. "However, there are signs: Pettigrew has remained unfound, Jorkins has disappeared, the events that happened at the World Cup, Alastor Moody was attacked before he entered Hogwarts, and the darkening of Voldemort's mark. All I can guess is that he's on the move."

Harry remained expressionless as he pondered for a moment. While he might think of Dumbledore as a great teacher, he obviously didn't trust him which explained the number of unbreakable vows they made him swear. Yet, it was imprudent to lose any allies at this point in time, when they were approaching the tipping point that would

shatter the fragile peace of the Magical world. With the revival of Lord Voldemort, they would undoubtedly go to war.

"Thank you for the warning. If Riddle is gaining strength, then I believe we're standing at the brink of another great war and I wish to prevent that. After all, he'll most certainly come after me and my family, so as to strike fear in the hearts of the people. To protect my loved ones, I'll need to stop him." Harry finally said.

The old man let out a sigh.

"How I wish that you were wrong, but yes, he and his minions will target those who are nearest and dearest to you in an effort to break you. If you're determined to prevent this war, then I have little choice but to help you as much as I can."

It was true he had little choice in the matter since he made an unbreakable vow to serve him for the next thirteen years.

"You'll have to, Professor. I know you're being forced to protect me, but I really will need your help when the time comes. You have more experience with wars and your expertise will be invaluable," said Harry earnestly. "Although I don't want to be kept in the dark of any actions you will be taking, I will however allow you to keep the confidence of your source."

Professor Dumbledore nodded.

"I'll do exactly as you've said when that time comes. In the meantime, I will continue to get updates from my source and I'll inform you accordingly. I've kept you long enough – I believe you have lessons to attend this morning?"

He nodded, standing up. He bid his professor good-bye before heading to his first class of the day. Hermione was sitting at the front, reading an extremely thick book as she waited for him. Harry was glad that her bag was charmed to be weight as light as a feather or the weight of all her heavy books would have affected her posture. Harry quietly slipped into the seat near her, hoping to surprise her.

However, once again, he failed - she sensed him when he was inches away from her.

"Where've you been?" asked Hermione.

He placed his bag down and recounted his meeting with Dumbledore.

She grew thoughtful as he shared.

"It's good that Sirius had the foresight to ensure Dumbledore watches your back. We might miss some of the signs because we're too involved in it," said Hermione, smiling.

"It's one more reason to put your mind at rest. We're lagging on our school work, you know?" commented Harry casually.

"What!" Hermione exclaimed in alarm. She hurriedly pressed several buttons on her watch and checked her schedule and her to-do list.

"No, we're on schedule. We've already handed in all of last week's homework. The rest is due this Friday," said Hermione, expelling a sigh of relief. She was so busy that she was afraid she might have really neglected her school work.

"That's why we're behind," Harry insisted with a straight face while Hermione frowned in confusion. "We usually turn in our homework at least a week in advance." Harry went on, repressing his laughter.

Hermione let out a snarl and swatted his arm in annoyance, causing Harry to burst out laughing. After a while, the other fourth year Gryffindor students entered the classroom in groups and filled up the room. A good number of them had dropped Divination or another elective and took Arithmancy instead. Neville was one of those who ditched Divination, finding the subject difficult to manage. He joined them right at the front.

"I thought I was going to be late. I was working on one of my potion essays," explained Neville.

Before Harry or Hermione could answer, the professor had arrived.

The class took out their books and fell silent immediately. Professor Vector might be young but she was nearly as strict as Professor McGonagall. Professor Vector was glad that Harry had honoured his promise by being prompt and present for her lesson and she smiled when she saw him. She greeted the class and began the day's lesson. They obediently flipped their books to the page she had instructed. She taught several new concepts and worked out several problems on the large blackboard for the class. Harry and Hermione, along with the rest of the class, spent most of the time copying the solutions to the problems she had already worked out.

Finally, just ten minutes before the bell, she assigned the homework, set her chalk down, and faced the class.

"Just before you go off to your next class, the Headmistress has asked me to make a quick announcement. Hogwarts will be hosting the Tri-Wizards' Ball, taking place on Halloween night, at the end of the month. The ball will only be open to fourth years and above unless you choose to invite a younger student."

Halloween huh, Harry thought. The death anniversary of his parents. They couldn't commemorate it privately this year.

There were excited whispers in the class but Professor Vector continued.

"For those who never had the opportunity to attend a ball before, you're required to wear dress robes. The event will start at seven and end at midnight. The theme of the ball will be Masquerade which means you are required to wear a mask during the ball."

The students grew even more thrilled at the idea.

Professor Vector smiled and raised her voice slightly so that she could be heard over the buzz.

"Class, you can all talk about this once I've finished the announcement."

The room fell silent once again.

"This is a time for you to have fun, mingle with the guests, and get to know them better. It is advised that you polish up on your manners and work on your dancing, especially if you've discovered that you have two left feet. There will be classes on decorum and dance lessons for you to sign up for if you wish. Details can be found on the bulletin board in every common room. These lessons are very useful especially for those of you who have not had formal training in dance or etiquette."

The bell rang and there was the usual shuffle of activity as the students packed their bags, swung them onto their shoulders, and headed out of the classroom. Most of them were still excitedly talking about the ball.

"Mr. Potter, if I might have a word, please," called Professor Vector over the din.

Harry nodded, slung his dragon-hide bag over his shoulder and walked towards her desk. She waited until the rest of the class was gone before she spoke.

"It's a tradition for the Champions and their partners to open the ball with a dance. I don't have to worry about you not having a partner, do I?" asked Professor Vector and a small smile appeared on her face.

"No," said Harry. "However, I think I should formally ask her first before I can say for certain."

"It's excellent not to make assumptions. Please be reminded that you and Miss Granger have to be at the entrance at seven sharp on the evening of the ball." concluded Professor Vector.

Harry chuckled and he answered. "We'll be there." He bade her goodbye and joined Hermione and Neville outside.

"I heard the conversation you have with Professor Vector," said Hermione when he approached them.

"That's great, so you probably know what I'm about to ask," replied Harry, smiling. He cleared his voice in a dignified sort of way and straightened himself exaggeratedly.

Hermione repressed her laughter as she watched him intently.

"Milady," began Harry earnestly, "Would you do me the honour of attending the Ball as my partner? I would suffer a fate worse than death if you refused me."

Standing beside her, Neville was gaping.

"Oh, be serious, love," said Hermione, laughing.

"I am, Hermione." Harry insisted whilst keeping a straight face.

Her eyes were twinkling playfully. "I can't very well let the esteemed Lord Gryffindor suffer, can I? I would be delighted to go to the ball with you."

Harry grinned, took her hand and planted a kiss on her knuckles.

"Thank you, my love." Harry said, his eyes reflecting sincerity. Hermione smiled, knowing that he was indeed pleased that she agreed to attend.

Neville, who was standing on the side watching them closely, was pale.

"I think you've frightened Neville with your exaggerated manner of asking, Harry," commented Hermione as she watched Neville. Turning to her friend she said, "Harry was just fooling around. That's really not a good way to ask a girl to the ball."

Neville gave a sigh of relief and wiped the perspiration from his brow.

"That's a relief," answered Neville, smiling. "I can't imagine myself doing that."

Harry chortled.

"It's actually a lot simpler - just go up to the girl and ask. Anyway, who are you planning to ask?" Harry asked as they fell in step and headed towards the dungeon for their potion lessons. "I noticed that Lavender was staring at you when Professor Vector made the announcement."

He pinked a little in embarrassment. "No, I was sure she was staring at you."

"No, I'm very certain it was you. I'm sure everyone in Gryffindor knows that I'm going with Hermione," said Harry and Neville chuckled. "You do have someone in mind?" repeated Harry, watching him closely.

Harry had noticed that Neville and Luna had been spending a lot of time together. Harry was concern with his friend. Even though he had grown to be more confident of his abilities, he still possessed a rather low self-esteem.

"I do, but I'm not sure if she'd want to go with someone like me." Neville admitted, lowering his head.

"Of course you aren't sure- you haven't asked her yet." Harry pointed out. Neville looked bewildered for a moment before he smiled.

"I'd go with you if Harry and I weren't together." Hermione interjected. "Why wouldn't I? You're such an amazing person."

The smile on his face grew wider, "Thanks, I appreciate you saying that." Neville said. "It's not like anyone could even imagine the two of you apart. Anyway, I'll ask her soon." There was determined expression on his face.

Harry couldn't fathom what things would be like, not being with Hermione and a thought crossed his mind. "Mione, I realise that because we've made a deep commitment to each other and I've pretty much asked you to be my partner in all aspects of our life, you won't be able to accept any other invitations to the ball. I hope you don't feel like you're missing out." commented Harry in an afterthought.

She lifted one of her brow enquiringly. "Of course not. Anyway, who'd ask me? I'm sure no one is even thinking of asking me because they know that I'll attend it with you. Professor Vector doesn't know we're married, but she was dead sure that I'd be accompanying you."

"People who love to take chances." said Harry, shrugging indifferently. Like Viktor Krum.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Really, Harry." There was a hint of exasperation in her tone.

He held up his hands in a placating manner. "It's the truth, sweetheart. Don't get annoyed with me, because he'll definitely ask you," said Harry. There wasn't a hint of jealousy in his voice and she relaxed. A silly grin appeared on his face suddenly. "I'm so convinced that I bet you a Galleon that he'll ask you within two days."

Hermione frowned but she took him up on his bet.

During lunch, Harry discovered that Cedric also made sure that Daphne would go with him to the ball before someone else could ask her. Earlier, Cedric decided to pick her up from her potions class when he walked in on an older Slytherin student about to ask Daphne to the ball. Cedric frowned and promptly asked her at once. She turned to Cedric and agreed to his request at a heartbeat. Turning back to the enthusiastic older Slytherin, she told him that she'd already promised to go with her boyfriend.

"That was really mean of you, Daph," said Susan, frowning.

"It was the truth. I promised Cedric that I was going with him," answered Daphne, unrepentant. "Besides, why would I go with anyone else? Everyone knows that Cedric is my boyfriend. Anyone who chooses to ask me to the ball is just asking to be rejected."

The table dissolved into amused laughter.

George announced that he was going to Angelina - he had asked her immediately after the lesson was over. No one asked Harry or

Hermione since the all assumed that Harry and Hermione would go together.

"Well, good for all of you who already have dates," said Susan dejectedly. "Where am I going to find a partner for the ball?"

"I'm sure plenty will ask," said Hermione encouragingly.

"If either Macmillan or Justin asks me, I'd rather go alone." Susan declared, sighing. "I mean they're not even on the Quidditch team." Susan said this in a tone that suggested that it was a crime for guys not to be on the Quidditch team.

"Hey, I'm not on the team!" said Neville, slightly offended.

"Nev, you may not be on the team, but you're an excellent keeper." Susan explained, giving him an encouraging smile as she patted his hand. "They look like the kind of guys who can't even stay on their brooms," she continued, wincing.

Most of them rolled their eyes at her answer, unable to believe that she was so enthralled with guys who play Quidditch.

No one in the group except George signed up for the extra lessons since most of them were proficient dancers. George had done it to accompany his girlfriend, Angelina.

After lunch, Hermione decided to go to the library to return some of the books alone. Because of his talk with Dumbledore earlier that morning, Harry didn't have the time to go with her as he wanted to and they went separate ways. He had too much work to attend to and headed back to their quarters first.

She sensed his irritation as he made his way back to the quarters. It seemed that Harry was accosted by plenty of girls along the way, asking to be his escort to the ball. He was annoyed because it had, first, delayed him from his Head duties and second, he was certain that most of the girls wouldn't have wanted to go to the ball with him if he wasn't Lord Gryffindor.

Hermione sighed when she saw a group of Krum's fans sitting in the library pretending to read. One of the giggly fan girls even appeared to be reading a book, but it was upside-down and Hermione rolled her eyes. This was a clear sign that Krum was in the library. Following the direction of their stares, she saw the quiet Quidditch Star, sitting by himself reading.

He looked as if he was waiting for someone since he wasn't paying attention to the book he was reading.

Hermione hurriedly returned her book, hoping that the Durmstrang Champion wouldn't see her. Apparently, luck wasn't on her side because he spotted her immediately.

A smile graced his face as he stood up. He strode over to her. "Hi, Herm-own-ninny. I vos vaiting for you."

"Hi, Krum," she said.

"Viktor, Herm-own-ninny," he insisted. She was aware that the giggly girls had turned quiet immediately when they discovered that they were friends on a first-name basis. Hermione didn't have to look to know that all the attention in the library was now focused on them.

His brows contracted slightly, he took her hand gently yet firmly and steered her into the heart of the library.

They were quite deep into the library when Krum finally stopped. They were completely surrounded by towering shelves. Since this area was a short distance from the restricted section of the library, it was completely vacant.

Krum let go of her hand, satisfied that no one would watch or eavesdrop on their conversation.

An uncomfortable silence fell between them when they realised that they were completely alone. Krum was rubbing the back of his neck nervously.

"I really need to go, Krum," added Hermione. Even though they were friends, she shouldn't allow him to lead her off that way.

"Please don't," pleaded Krum. "I'm sorry. I vos not thinking when I pulled you here. What I mean is I vos thinking if you would vant to be my partner for the ball?" asked Krum hopefully. When Hermione didn't say anything, he searched her face expectantly.

"Krum..." She began finally.

"Viktor," repeated Krum firmly.

"Viktor, I'm sorry, but I can't. I'm already going with someone else." Hermione answered, brushing one of her stray hair back.

Krum frowned. "Harry Potter?" questioned Krum in his thick Bulgarian brogue, eyeing her closely.

"Yes," said Hermione. "We've been together for some quite some time, Viktor."

He let out a curse in Bulgarian, looking very surly at the thought of her going to the ball with Harry. He didn't say anything, he just turned and left.

Hermione discovered that Harry was right on both counts- Krum had liked her and would ask her to be his date. The realisation that Krum liked her left her surprised and upset- she was shocked that anyone besides Harry would be attracted to her after knowing her true bookish self. Hermione walked out from the shelves, aware that everyone in the library was watching her and talking about her as she made her way out of the library quickly.

Harry was halfway through his correspondence when he heard Hermione entering the study.

"I wasn't expecting you so soon. I thought you'd prefer to spend some more time in the library reading," said Harry, not looking up from the document he was reading.

"I would until Viktor asked me out to the ball," said Hermione, frowning as she perched on the corner of his desk.

"Ah. I hope you turned him down flat." Harry replied cheekily, grinning fiercely.

"Don't be mean. I felt bad for him - he looked as if he mustered a great deal of courage to ask me just so I could turn him down." Hermione said quietly. Harry realised that Hermione really did view Krum as a friend after spending so much time with him in the library.

Harry stood up, put his arms around her gently. "He'll get over it," said Harry, kissing her brow tenderly. "I guess maybe I should be upset since I turned down plenty of girls today," mused Harry, idly playing with her hair.

Hermione lifted her head from his chest and swatted his chest.

"I know you're not feeling a bit remorseful for your deeds," said Hermione, her eyes narrowed.

"You're right. I don't regret turning all of them down. Why should I since they only like the image of Lord Gryffindor?" asked Harry with laughing gravity. "My heart belongs to only one person. I know there's only one silly fool who would choose to go to the ball with me even if I had no money, no fame, no title, and a lot of emotional baggage."

"Prat," answered Hermione, swatting his chest again since he called her a 'silly fool'. She leaned into his embrace and let him hold her close.

Harry closed his eyes, enjoying the feeling of having her in his arms.

He also knew that he wasn't the only one who had fallen in love with her. His spirit soared when he reminded himself that she had chosen him over those other guys.

Hermione had the chance to meet the Hungarian Horntail up close the next day when Hagrid took all his Care for Magical Creatures

classes to the pen where the Hungarian Horntail was. He recalled a favour so that his class would have a closer glimpse at the magnificent creature. There were about eight keepers struggling with the Hungarian Horntail, trying to chain her properly. She was kicking a great fuss, breathing jets of fire in the air.

The Hungarian Horntail let out an awful screeching howl as she arched her neck.

"Back away. Stay at least forty feet from the dragon. I've seen her do that far before," said one of the Keepers.

The students all ooh-ed and ah-ed at the sight of the large Hungarian Horntail and kept a safe distance from the raging dragon but Harry didn't - he was upset. He threw himself over the high fence and approached the dragon with a boldness that shocked everyone. The keepers had whipped out their wands in their attempt to stun the dragon when he halted them. Harry saw rows and rows of chain on her body, neck and head shackling her to the ground.

"Relax," cooed Harry, leaping away when she blew a jet of flames in his direction. She halted at the sound of his voice and turned to look at him. The keepers gave a sigh of relief as they tightened the chains.

Aren't you that brave one?

"Yes, I am," said Harry, glad that she still recognised him.

I'm sorry about that, she said apologetically. I'm a little hungry and these two-legged refuse to let me hunt. She arched her neck slightly, sniffing. We're not alone? I smell more two-legged.

"No, my school mates are over there," said Harry, gesturing around the pen. "The Keepers are afraid that you might eat them."

Mushroom-shaped smoke erupted from her nostrils as her laughter filled his head.

I don't seem to be trying to devour you, am I? I'm not at all interested in eating humans but I want fresh food.

Harry grinned broadly, "The forest is quite large and I believe you can feed in there. Let me see if I can convince to let you have a bit more movement."

She snorted in disbelief.

"She's hungry and she wants to hunt for food herself," began Harry. "Don't worry, she won't hurt anyone, just release the chains," said Harry to the keepers. The large and proud dragon which was heavily chained to the ground was watching them expectantly.

The keepers, with their wands out, looked at each other with uncertainty.

"It'll put your schoolmates in jeopardy." The Head Keeper warned, keeping a close eye on the dragon. "I don't want to take any unnecessary risk."

"She will continue to kick a fuss if she remains hungry," answered Harry impatiently.

As if to prove his point, the Hungarian Horntail snarled.

Hermione climbed over the fence towards the Hungarian Horntail cautiously, unarmed. The Hungarian Horntail, intrigued by the entry of another unarmed human, turned to look at her.

She whipped out her wand and removed the chains that were holding the dragon's neck down. The Keepers protested loudly but backed away when the Hungarian Horntail bared her teeth at them. Smoke was billowing from her nose threateningly.

The dragon stretched her neck slightly and scanned her surroundings. Seeing nothing intimidating, she lowered her head so that she could look at Hermione critically.

Thank you, two-legged.

"You're welcome," said Hermione, patting her on the stout as if she was just a tame dog. "How should I address you?"

The dragon blinked in surprise.

I am Uasal and you are?

It was a befitting name for a creature so proud and strong. "Hermione, the one you call brave one is Harry," answered Hermione. Harry, following Hermione's lead, released the dragon completely from its restraints. She stood up and stretched her large velvet wings.

Thank you, Harry.

The keepers and students hurriedly backed off, in fear that the Uasal would harm them.

She snorted again when she saw the other humans scurrying away. Hagrid was the only one standing by the fence, watching the dragon with admiration written all over his face.

Care to accompany me on a hunt, young Harry and Hermione?

They exchanged looks between themselves. It was exceeding rare that a creature as proud as the dragon would invite a human to ride on her. They hurriedly conjured make-shift saddles with harnesses so that they could tie themselves to the dragon. Much to the astonishment of everyone, they climbed on the back of the fierce and unapproachable dragon. She gave the keepers an arrogant look, as if challenging them to do their worse as she unfolded her large black wings. Without giving a warning, she took off, and flew into the air.

With three strong flaps of her large wings , she was soaring above the forest.

Harry and Hermione held onto the dragon firmly, paying attention to the sharp spikes on her large body. Harry yelled in delight as Uasal sped up, his hair tossing wildly in the air. Uasal was equally delighted with the freedom to soar.

Back in the reserve, we would fly often like this, she commented. You two are mates, aren't you?

Harry and Hermione were taken aback by her sudden question.

Uasal chuckled, breathing black smoke, at their surprise.

It's not difficult to tell. She gives you courage to do what you think it is right, while you trust and believe in her strength and power. You make a splendid couple.

The aerial trip around the Forbidden forest was thrilling. Uasal was very careful as she soared around the Forbidden forest looking for food. It was an eye-opener for both of them and they admired her skill at hunting. Uasal was intelligent, decisive, and bold. She would use any advantage that was given to her to capture any unsuspecting large prey. For a creature as large as her, she was unusually swift. She knew how to hide her presence well. Before the prey could notice her, she would have broken its neck with her jaws, and then she would swallow it with a gulp.

Uasal, Harry and Hermione had a compelling conversation with one another.

Why is it that you understand what I speak? Uasal finally asked.

"We have an ability to communicate with Magical beings," replied Hermione.

After hunting several large animals, they finally returned back to the pen.

They gracefully climbed off the back of the dragon.

It has been a pleasure to meet the both of you, Harry and Hermione. I learned earlier that I'll be going back tonight. I hope we'll have a chance to see each other again, said Uasal.

"We will," answered Harry, patting on her snout gently. She playfully breathed out a cloud of black smoke on him. Hermione laughed,

petting her. She lay on the ground tamely, protectively watching the couple join their friends.

The keepers were shocked that she was so well-behaved after a hunt.

"Didn't I tell you that she was hungry?" Harry asked as he approached the keepers. "There's no need for her to be tied up. She won't harm anyone. If you all could see her as more than just a beast, you'd realise that she is quite intelligent - she understands what we say. Anyway, she's looking forward to going back to the reserve tonight."

Hagrid was mightily pleased with them. They returned to the castle for their theory lessons on dragons.

Later that afternoon, Amelia privately met Harry in his study. Hermione was with the rest of the girls in the sitting room of the Chamber, discussing the upcoming Tri-Wizard Ball.

Harry teased her about her engagement for a while before she began updating him on her investigation.

The usual spells to stop others from eavesdropping were put in place as they spoke at length.

"I've finally come up with the final lists of names after a lengthy enquiry." Amelia announced proudly. "Most of the names on the list are either very influential members of the society or they are a part of the ministry. Avery, Alecto, and Amycus Carrow, Crabbe, Goyle, Walden Macnair, Lucius Malfoy, Nott, and Yaxley." Amelia listed grimly. "They fit the bill. They were suspected Death eaters that escaped Azkaban claiming that they were under the Imperius curse, they all had the same special burns on their bodies, and they had bought tickets to attend the World Cup."

A frown of confusion appeared on Harry's face.

"You can't arrest them, can you? That's why you haven't made a move?" said Harry, certain that his gut feeling was right.

Amelia sighed. "Yes, I can't. There isn't sufficient evidence to convict them. We can't arrest them based on the fact that they share a special burn. These aren't the Dark times - we can't just put them in Azkaban simply because they are suspected Death-eaters."

"But surely you can't just let them get away with this!" exclaimed Harry emotionally, clenching his fists. "They're Riddle's cronies and they were torturing Non-magical children just because they could. Why can't you try them and administer Veritaserum. They won't be able to deny their involvement that way."

Amelia shook her head.

"No, it doesn't work that way, Harry. If we were allowed to just administer Veritaserum all cases, then these people would not get off scot-free and we would be able to close plenty of cases. Unfortunately, we need the approval of the entire Wizengamot to do that – and some of them are very influential members." Amelia explained miserably. "Because Professor Dumbledore's case was riding on public sympathy, the Wizengamot quickly came to the decision to infringe on his rights and allow the use of Veritaserum. It didn't hurt that Dumbledore himself agreed to the potion's use. In this case, we can't even bring the suspects into court because we don't have adequate evidence."

"Damn. So you're just going to let them be?" asked Harry incredulously, looking at her.

"Of course not. That was just the official stance on the matter," admitted Amelia and a smile, fierce and devious, appeared on her face.

"On the sly, I've asked Oswald and Remus to research ways we can track people. The Grangers have assisted them by providing information some non-magical counterparts and they've been making some headway in the project. They've come up with a system that requires a drop of blood from the person that needs to be tracked. We secretly obtained samples of their blood when they recently went to St. Mungo's for treatment. Tracking them is somewhat like the concept of the Marauder's map, however in a larger scale. They're

working on making it a multi-layered map so that they can even trace which part of the house they are in. For now, we can only pinpoint their general location."

Harry grew pensive, drumming his fingers on the arm of the chair absently. "How broad is general?" asked Harry, curious.

"The closest town," said Amelia.

"With such large scope, you're going by the assumption that they'll need to gather somewhere before they carry out some death-eater activity? So you're waiting for the right moment to catch them in the act?" Harry clarified.

"I'm sure that any day now they'll come up with something else to cause chaos just because of sheer arrogance. This time we'll be ready for them," said Amelia, firmly. "A decade out of Azkaban is just too long. I have already started looking into these people closely. We have started to use all the influence we have to block them from wielding control from behind-the-scenes."

A wolfish gleam appeared in his eyes.

"Great, now we should focus on monitoring their venues of income, bank accounts, and properties they own so that we can clamp down on them when we need to." Harry suggested excitedly.

"We're already on it." Amelia affirmed with a wicked grin. "This time around, we'll have the upper hand."

Harry updated her on the incident with Dumbledore and she was glad that a person as experienced as Dumbledore was looking out for him. She was confident that the old man would not be tempted to return to his old ways because of all the unbreakable vows in place. She went on to explain the progress of the investigation into the hitch with the Goblet of Fire.

"Well, I've spoken to the Goblins to learn more about their treasure. They agreed that it could not have been the work of a student so we deduced it must be the faithful servant he has housed at Hogwarts.

Tonks and I are looking into the circumstances of the Death Eaters who died in jail, following Luna's profile. It's been tough – the guards in Azkaban don't record these incidents accurately. Most of the prisoners go mad within a week and lose their magical power completely, so they monitor the state of health of the prisoners more closely than the deaths." explained Amelia.

"Ah, so you're looking out for unusual circumstances of death?" asked Harry, rubbing his chin. "You suspect that this loyal servant escaped from Azkaban?"

"Yes, I think Luna's profiling of the loyal servant is very accurate." Amelia admitted, sipping her tea. "We're working with a very far-fetched theory that assumes that death is the only way someone can flee from jail. I'm working with Sirius since he was there for more than a decade."

"That's quite a lot of progress, Aunt Am," said Harry, amazed that all the adults seemed to be working hard. "I appreciate the all the time and effort you've put into it."

"Don't worry about it." Amelia assured, seeing the worry on his face. "You all have an important task to accomplish and that is to focus on learning the skills to protect yourselves. There will be times we will slip and we don't want anything to happen to you."

"We take Professor Moody's lessons seriously and we are making progress," replied Harry, smiling.

"That's great. I hope I can arrange all of you to undergo Auror combat training by next summer holiday." Amelia said, returning the smile. "I have to head back to the office to deal with some internal matters; but I'll be back to show you the equipment soon."

Harry nodded and ended all the spells with a flick of a wand.

They bade each other goodbye and Dobby took her straight back to her office.

Harry closed his eyes and relaxed into his armchair. Everyone seemed to be doing everything they could to protect him. He was grateful that he had a family that cared for him so much.

Checking his watch, he realised that he was going to be late for lessons if he didn't hurry. He swung his dragon-hide bag onto his shoulders and hurried out of the quarters to class.

Everyone was still obsessing with the coming ball - well at least the girls were. They were giggling and whispering along the corridors as Harry walked past them. He usually saw them excitedly comparing notes about what they were wearing during meals or lessons. The girls seemed to be only able to talk about the Tri-Wizard Ball, and the dancing and etiquette lessons.

By the end of the second week after the Tri-Wizard Ball was announced, everyone knew that the two Hogwarts Champions were attending the ball with their girlfriends and were disappointed. Fleur and Krum seemed to be turning down all the offers and no one in school actually knew who they were going with.

Harry was surprised to see that even Hermione seemed to be thrilled about the ball. She, like the rest of the girls, decided to keep the dress she was wearing a surprise from her partner. It took a lot of work since she had to remember to put up her shields whenever she was thinking about it.

He had to admit that by keeping her wardrobe a surprise, he was really beginning to look forward to the ball. He even gave her the green light to purchase anything she might need for the masquerade.

For the rest of the weeks leading up to the big event, Harry and his friends decided to travel in packs so that they would not have to field offers from other students. Apparently, no one seemed to care that they already had dates thus motivating them to look for a better solution. The tactic seemed to work since most of the guys and girls lost the courage to single any of them out while they were in such a large group.

It worked on everyone but Fleur.

Harry was with Hermione, Susan, and Neville, heading back to the castle from their class when Fleur approached him. They were discussing various types of dragons as part of their homework from the Care for Magical Creatures lesson. Hagrid had started his series of lessons on the fascinating creatures after bringing them to see the Hungarian Horntail.

"ello 'arry," said Fleur, cheerfully.

"Do you 'ave a moment? Can we talk privately?" asked Fleur, looking meaningfully at his company.

He acceded to her request when Hermione and Neville politely moved away to give them space. Susan did it reluctantly, only moving away when Neville led her off by her hand.

"What is it, Fleur?" Harry inquired curiously, keeping his distance.

Fleur gave him a dazzling smile.

"Well, I was 'oping zat you're still looking for a partner. Would you go to ze ball wiz me?" Fleur asked hopefully, tossing her hair.

He arched one of his eyebrows in surprise, certain that she must have heard that he was going with Hermione.

"I'm sorry. I'm already going with Hermione." said Harry finally.

"Oh, I thought zat she was going with Viktor? Zere iz word zat Viktor asked 'er to ze ball." Fleur said in surprise, glancing at Hermione, who was standing a distance away from them.

"Viktor Krum? No, you probably heard incorrectly. He may have asked her, but she's going to the ball with me." Harry reiterated firmly, leaving no room for doubts.

She lifted one of her brows in surprise. "Oh? So she agreed to go with you? I 'eard zat she 'as a mind of her own." Fleur said.

He frowned at the negative connotation in Fleur's statement. "You're right; she does have a mind of her own," Harry replied. "That is one of the greatest things about her. You can't think that this is a one-sided relationship?" exclaimed Harry.

Fleur nodded and explained. "I'm not ze only one. Everyone zinks so. You may be crazy about 'er but she does not return ze affections."

"We're crazy about each other," assured Harry.

Her brows furrowed, as if she was unconvinced. "She doesn't show it but you do. You can't keep your 'ands off 'er but she iz less excited," clarified Fleur. "If I were 'er, I wouldn't be able to keep my 'ands off you," added Fleur innocently.

Harry was certain that Hermione must have heard her since she was standing quite close. Susan looked affronted.

"We're very happily in love," concluded Harry. He saw no need in justifying his statement since he knew that it was the truth. "I'm sure you won't have any trouble finding another date?"

She blinked in surprise at the sudden change of topic and she laughed a throaty and rich laugh.

"No, I won't." Fleur shrugged, her eyes twinkling. "For your sake, I 'ope you are right. I was just trying my luck. I'll see you around, 'arry," bade Fleur, kissing Harry on the cheek before walking towards the carriages.

"Who does that Delacour thinks she is?" exclaimed Susan heatedly when Harry joined them at the flight of stone steps.

Harry noticed that Hermione was being very quiet.

He frowned since there were three likely reasons: First, she could be jealous over Fleur. Next, she could be upset that the news of Krum asking her to the ball had spread. Finally, the opinion that Hermione did not love Harry as much as he loved her could have troubled her.

"Fleur has always been very confident of her charms. However, it doesn't matter. I'm pleased knowing that others think I'm the obsessed one in this relationship." Harry admitted, smiling. "We know it isn't true," whispered Harry tenderly, turning to look at Hermione and lacing his fingers with Hermione's.

Their gazes met in an intense way.

Neville chuckled - it was crystal clear from the way they looked at each other that they were deeply in love with each other. Beside him, Susan was also watching them quietly with a large silly grin on her face. He could tell that she had worked herself into a rage for their sake. Neville beamed knowingly at Susan as he put a hand on Susan's shoulder and she returned the smile. They stood at the side, watching their friends kissing each other passionately.

Later that evening, Harry and Hermione were alone in their sitting room, working on their essays. There was a goofy smile on Harry's face and he was shooting occasional glances at her, whenever he thought she wasn't looking.

"Sweetheart, can you please stop that? It's very distracting," chided Hermione lightly, not lifting her head from her work to look at him.

Harry chuckled loudly.

"I can't help it. I keep thinking about what happened earlier today. You were really jealous, weren't you?" Harry probed. "I can't imagine you getting jealous, Angel."

"Yes, I was and I can," replied Hermione in a clipped tone.

She was visibly annoyed but it did nothing to dampen Harry's mood.

Harry was smiling from ear to ear. "So I'm not the only one stupid enough to be jealous?" asked Harry gleefully.

Her eyes were narrowed into slits when she lifted her head to look at him. The corner of her lips quivered in amusement when she realised how happy he was.

The smile on her face disappeared entirely when another thought crossed her mind.

"There was another reason why I was upset." Hermione admitted, finally looking at him. "I think I may have encouraged Krum to pursue me since I don't appear to be in love with you."

"You silly girl," said Harry, laughing. "Why, it doesn't stop the other girls from chasing me even though I'm rumoured to be obsessed with you. Krum still would've asked you to the ball even if you couldn't keep your hands off me because he is really interested in you."

Hermione smiled and kissed him lightly on his lips. "I love you more than anything in this world, Harry Potter. Don't ever forget that."

"Nev, you really need to ask this girl before you end up dateless to the Ball." Harry reminded, shaking his head as they headed to the Great Hall for their lunch.

Neville turned tomato red.

"I'm t-trying to work up the courage to ask her," answered Neville fretfully.

"Don't think about it anymore. Just go up to her and ask," advised Harry.

Neville nodded nervously. He finally took Harry's advice. He mustered all his courage, went straight to Luna, asked her to be his date, and she agreed in a heartbeat. It came as no surprise to anyone in the group.

The girls were naturally excited since they were all going to the Tri-Wizard Ball. Cho was attending the ball with a guy from Beauxbatons. In the middle of the week, Susan cheerfully announced that she had finally gotten a date but she refused to disclose his identity, afraid that they would make fun of her.

"Are you sure it isn't some imaginary guy?" teased Fred.

The smile on her face was wiped off immediately. She glared at him with narrowed eyes.

"Of course not!" she exclaimed in a huff. "You can check for yourself if he's a figment of my imagination during the Tri-Wizard Ball," growled Susan, storming off furiously.

Harry halted Hermione when she sought to chase her.

"No, let him do it." Harry said gruffly, glaring at Fred. "You know how important it was to her to find a date for this ball. Why can't you just be happy for her? Anyway, you'd better go after her since it was your fault."

A look of guilt crossed Fred's face.

It was clear from all the expressions on the faces of his friends that they were very annoyed with him, so Fred stood up and gave chase.

It was not clear how Fred managed to calm Susan down but she wasn't angry when she joined them in the Chamber that evening. They had decided to practice dancing in the days leading up to the Ball to make sure that they all still knew the moves.

Cedric, like Harry, needed to open the ball with Daphne. He didn't have much experience with the formal dances, so he needed to work on it. He looked very ungainly compared to his partner, Daphne, who was a capable and poised dancer.

"Confidence," commented Harry thoughtfully, observing Cedric. "You know your steps and you've got rhythm. Just relax and flow with the music."

"It's difficult to relax when your partner is such a graceful dancer and so much better than you." Cedric replied.

Harry decided to take up Cedric's challenge.

Daphne stepped into Harry's arms and they began whirling around the large room to the music that the magically enchanted CD player was playing. There were smiles on their faces as they waltzed around the large training room.

"Well, I guess you need to become a better dancer so you can keep up with such a skilled partner," commented Cedric, slapping Harry on his back when they finally stopped dancing, albeit reluctantly.

Harry laughed heartily.

"Bloody brilliant, how long you have been learning to do that?" asked Fred in shock. He couldn't tear his eyes away from them. He had heard that Harry was a good dancer but this was the first time seeing him in action.

"We took lessons about a year ago." Harry answered, grinning as he turned to look at his wife. "Hermione was such a good dancer that I had no choice but to keep practicing so I could catch up to her."

"We practiced every day," added Hermione, smiling as she recollected those wonderful days they spent at the House, whirling around the room in each other's arms as Elissa watched over them. "Harry had to massage my feet almost every day because he was always stepping on them."

Harry gave an uncomfortable laugh as he scratched the back of his head.

His friends gaped in disbelief, unable to believe that Harry was such a terrible dancer when he begun.

Harry and Hermione watched over them and guided them during these sessions.

Cedric wasn't too bad. After a few practices, he was waltzing gracefully with Daphne in his arms. They were a fetching couple, both equally good-looking, with their own charms that were so vastly different. Daphne's charms lay in her enigma and her elusiveness – she was a challenge to all guys who sought to win her heart because

many but one had failed. Cedric was attractive with his easy, warm, and bubbly personality.

Neville was infinitely patient with Luna as she picked up steps. She did learn a bit during Harry's coming out ball so they built on that. He would smile encouragingly whenever Luna accidentally stepped on his feet and instructed the third year unhurriedly and tolerantly. Soon, the third year could perform the steps adequately.

Fred had never learned how to dance so Harry had to take him aside to teach him the steps. When Fred was ready, he partnered with Susan. It was comical to watch the two loggerheads trying to dance together. They were too stiff with each other and they couldn't seem to get it together – which frustrated Susan, who was a quite an adequate dancer.

"Can you watch where you put your feet?" exclaimed Susan, holding one of her feet, obviously in pain. Fred had accidentally treaded on her feet when he lost the count of the beats again. She had lost count of the number of times he had stepped on her feet.

"I'm sorry," said Fred, embarrassed. "How do Harry, Neville, and Cedric dance so effortlessly?"

"Practice," added Harry laughing. "I stepped on Hermione's feet frequently when I started learning."

"Do you need rest?" asked Fred, apologetically, eying her with concern, atypical of Fred.

She shook her head. "We have slightly more than a week to the ball. You need to learn how to hold a beat if you're planning to dance with your partner."

"At the expense of your toes?" questioned Fred incredulously.

She rolled her eyes. "Are you planning to sit out?" Susan asked, raising one of her eyebrows as if she was challenging him.

Fred smiled admiringly. His respect for her had risen considerably again.

"Very well, then I can't disappoint you, can I?" asked Fred, giving her a gleaming smile. With a look of determination on his face, he held Susan in the familiar dance posture and tried to dance to the music without crushing her toes.

Fred, with Harry's guidance, improved with each practice. By the eve of the Tri-Wizard Ball, Fred was no longer stepping on Susan's toes and he appeared to be enjoying himself. Everyone could see the pride on Susan's face when he danced fairly well.

"Katie Bell will be absolutely delighted tomorrow when she dances with you," said Susan, grinning.

"Can I have a dance with you tomorrow at the Tri-Wizard ball?" asked Fred politely. At her shock, he hastily continued, "I just want to thank you for your effort."

She smiled. "Why not? Hermione suggested we should all change partners tomorrow. You'll have to dance with rest of us," answered Susan.

Fred didn't understand why he felt a pang of disappointment but he ignored it and continued to dance with her to the slow music.

A/N: Thank you for all the reviews. I decided to thank the reviewer with the most helpful comments at the start of each new chapter. You can expect my next chapter to be late since my notebook crashed. Good for me that I remembered the content, so I was almost able to duplicate the file but it will still take a while. Anyway, have a blessed week.

Chapter 33: The Tri-wizard Ball

Beta-read by Frustr8dwriter

Many thanks to Alix33 for your helpful reviews!

A blaze was crackling noisily in the fireplace, chasing away the damp of the Chamber. It was the only sound heard in the room as the occupants were engaged in an intense game of chess. Sitting comfortably cross-legged in the large leather wingback armchair before a large beautiful chess table, Harry was staring at the chessboard intently, trying to anticipate his opponent's next move. His challenger was in a similar state of mind, his head propped up by a hand, as he surveyed the game with his cool grey eyes. A faint frown appeared on his rather handsome face as he considered his next move carefully.

All light-hearted conversation had ceased moments ago when Harry took the offensive and forced his opponent into a tricky position of choosing which strategically placed piece he was willingly to sacrifice. Harry had come up with a counter attack for the tactics Cedric was using, and Cedric was well aware that he wasn't going to be able to take this game. He rubbed his smooth chin contemplatively, trying to figure a way to turn the tide on Harry.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." Harry cautioned with a ghost of smile on his lips. Cedric looked up and searched his countenance and noticed that it was emotionless once again. Cedric rubbed the back of his neck hesitantly, Harry's words planting a seed of doubt in his mind.

Deciding it was silly to worry too much about Harry's cryptic statement, Cedric issued his rook to take the white pawn before it could be promoted. To his satisfaction, his rook knocked over the white pawn powerfully, almost obliterating it.

Harry didn't seem to mind, in fact he was laughing.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," said Harry, with a devilish grin. "Knight to E5. Checkmate." The ivory white knight galloped across the board, neatly cleaving the head of the Black Bishop before taking its place. True enough, the White Queen, castle, and the Knight had trapped the King - there weren't any other moves Cedric could take to remove his King from its perilous situation.

Resigned to its fate, the Black King took the exquisite crown from his head and tossed it onto the board with so much force that it shattered into many pieces.

Cedric sighed when he realised that he had lost again. Looking at his opponent, he saw the smile of triumph on Harry's face. "I can see that you truly enjoy thrashing me at this." Cedric drawled with a hint of annoyance. He wasn't a sore loser usually but he had already lost four out of five games to Harry.

Harry merely grinned in response. Cedric wasn't a terrible player but he wasn't in the same league as the person who introduced him to chess and was his chess buddy for two years. He knew that Ron was not wholly accepted by most cliques in Gryffindor because of his betrayal. Gryffindors might not prize loyalty as much as the Hufflepuffs, but they did view honour with great importance. Harry sincerely hoped the past year had helped Ron to change for the better.

With a wave of his wand, the shattered pieces that lay at the side of the board magically became whole again and trooped into its proper places on the board, waiting for the players to issue their commands.

It was highly odd that on the afternoon of the much anticipated Tri-Wizard Ball, the guys were so bored that they decided to pit their wits against each other in the game of Wizard's Chess. The girls, much to their mortification, chased all of them out of the Harry and Hermione's quarters after lunch. It was a good seven hours until the event began, but the girls didn't seem to care, insisting that they needed that much time to look good.

Harry, who should've been spearheading the protest, kept silent, knowing from his previous experience with his coming-out ball last

year that girls really did need quite a bit of time to get ready. He merely had one issue; he himself needed a place to get himself ready for the ball - which he raised the night before, when the girls excitedly asked him for his permission to use their rooms as their make-shift headquarters to prepare for the ball. It was easily resolved - Dobby or Winky would bring whatever he needed to the Chambers.

With so much time on their hands, the Weasley twins unsurprisingly went back to their dorm to busy themselves with inventing new and improved joke products. Neville chose to stay in the comfortable library of the Chambers to catch up on some reading, leaving Harry and Cedric quite lost.

They found solace from boredom by burying themselves in their work but even that didn't kill enough time. The piles of NEWT-year assignments or Head of House duties were only sufficient to occupy their attention for two hours.

Harry and Cedric were so used to spending their free time with their loves that they felt quite at a loss having so much down time without Hermione or Daphne to turn to. It was especially true for Harry, since Hermione had erected a mental wall between them. He was painfully aware of the void the absence of Hermione's thoughts and feelings had left. Spotting the chess table, they decided to play.

"How long have we been playing?" asked Cedric idly as he stood up to stretch.

Taking that as a sign that Cedric was too stiff to play another round, Harry waved his wand again. The chess pieces formed two lines and marched towards the wooden box. They leapt in, one after another and lay straight and flat in the box, until all of the pieces were neatly packed inside. He absently flicked his wand a third time and the wooden box was snapped shut.

His gaze flicked to this watch before returning to his good friend. "About three hours," said Harry, rolling his head to remove the tension in his shoulders.

Cedric gaped, unable to believe they still had two more hours to go.

"I'm sure it'll be worth the wait," commented Neville from the armchair before the fireplace. He delightedly flipped to the next page. A pile of books were stacked neatly on the side table near him and he was into his fourth book on his beloved subject - Herbology. He lifted his head from his book and glanced at two Champions with a smile. "Well, you two could work on your eggs or the spells that Professor Moody wanted us to work on."

As promised, Professor Moody worked on the finer aspects of Magic with them during the extra sessions they'd already had with him. They found that they could cast spells for longer periods of time ever since Professor Moody took them through different exercises to increase their magical capacity.

Cedric beamed. "Good thinking, Nev. Want to duel, Harry?" Cedric was very eager to put his new abilities to the test.

Harry had to admit it was a great way of killing time, but he didn't fancy facing Daphne's icy wrath if she realised that her date was weary or worse, late, because of him. Cedric was as competitive as he was – he'd naturally put his all into the duel until he collapsed from exhaustion.

He summoned a thick tome on Advance Defence Spells and tossed it at Cedric. Cedric caught the book easily with a hand, looking at Harry, baffled.

"We don't have pepper-up potions with us," said Harry simply. "And we still have a ball to attend. I don't want Daph to be mad at me if I overwork you." He summoned a book on a particular theory of magic from the shelves. Even though his side project on getting Hedwig to tap into his magic wasn't important, he thought it would be good if they could come up with a solution soon. He looked at the invisible ring nestling on his fourth ring finger and he sighed inwardly.

Cedric set the book on the table beside him.

"You're just afraid of losing to me, Harry. After all, I'm much bigger than you. You're afraid that Hermione will be angry with you if you're

too tired to dance with her tonight," goaded Cedric good-naturally. "Come on, no magic, only hand-to-hand."

Neville raised one of his eyebrows enquiringly at Cedric's challenge. Harry might be slightly smaller than the Weasley twins and Cedric, but his fighting technique was not something they could take lightly. He glanced at Harry and sighed - it was clear from the feral glint in Harry's eyes that he'd taken the bait.

Harry had been looking forward to some action all week. With all the preparation for the Tri-Wizard Ball, there wasn't simply time for them to work on their hand-to-hand combat and he played right into Cedric's hands.

"Let's go. Gym, now," demanded Harry, jerking his thumb at Cedric.

They didn't bother to change into more comfortable clothing and just divested themselves of the heavy robes and vests of their Hogwarts uniforms, leaving them clad in their shirts and slacks. They rolled up their long sleeves, in preparation for a heavy workout, and walked to the centre of the large room.

Cedric charmed the floor to be cushioned and they bowed to each other.

Harry was as daring as ever, choosing to attack first. He stepped into Cedric's personal circle and attempted to knock him over. Cedric found himself ducking and dodging Harry's blows as he inched backwards, trying to find an opening. He tried to sweep Harry off his feet but Harry had read his actions accurately and was able to hit him first. Cedric was slow to warm up, compared to Harry and when he did, Harry was pleased that Cedric was able to get a few hits in.

It was half an hour later when Cedric collapsed onto the padded floor, exhausted by the fight. His shirt was completely drenched with perspiration as he lay on the floor panting. Harry summoned the goblets of drinks and towels that Winky had carefully prepared for them while they were still sparring and sat next to him.

"Are you still up for the dance later?" teased Harry, handing him a goblet. Cedric's breathing had finally evened out and he sat up. There was a large smile on his face when he took the offered goblet.

"Of course," admitted Cedric. "Are you?"

"Hermione's coming with me to the Ball," said Harry. "I'm totally excited for that reason alone – after all it's the first event we're attending as a couple. However, I can't help thinking about the school's speculations. I'm aware that many are looking forward to see drama unfolding between Krum and me tonight. Fleur's barely getting used to the idea that I'm not available. But it's Krum that I'm most concerned about. Do you know who he's bringing to the Ball?"

"No, I don't – and I haven't heard any rumours about who it could be either. Actually, I'm pretty worried about Susan," answered Cedric. "I don't understand her need for secrecy."

Harry laughed. "I assume she isn't going with a fellow Hufflepuff?" He remembered her outburst. Susan had declared that she would be going alone if the guy who asked her wasn't on the Quidditch team.

"Yes, I checked with the team. According to them, several of them actually asked her, but they were turned down." Cedric disclosed. "I don't think you have to worry about tonight, Harry. You and Hermione are totally committed each other as well as being completely in love. Besides, you're bonded for life with the blessings of both your families and are wholly supported by your closest friends. Fleur and Viktor can't do much to change that."

"Your parents haven't given you and Daph the green light to become betrothed?" deduced Harry, watching his good friend closely.

Cedric sipped from his goblet. "No, they haven't. They're still convinced that Cho and I might get together in the future. I sensed that the idea that I'll have to take Daph's family name is also hindering them from giving us their approval. I guess I'll have to wait until Cho settles down with another guy," said Cedric in a resigned tone.

"Your parents ought to be aware of the rules of the society. Daph's the scion of an Ancient House, so she's of higher ranking. The person she makes her husband has to take her name so that there will be an heir to the line." said Harry, surprised.

"Yes, they're well aware of that and that I'd be marrying up. But, I'm the only son," answered Cedric gloomily. "They don't want to see the line of Diggory ending with me."

Harry patted him on the shoulder. "I'm sure they'll get used to the idea. I can't see either of them finding any faults with Daph."

Cedric chuckled with hilarity. "That reminds me of when my dad first met Daph. He was so infuriated when he couldn't find any flaws to criticise."

Harry joined him, laughing.

Harry checked his watch. "I think it's time for you to freshen up. You don't want to turn up late, do you?"

"I really love the convenience this watch offers - it takes me straight to my dorm." said Cedric smiling. He finished the water in a gulp and handed it back to Harry, who set it aside along with the used towels.

"Yes, yes. Time is ticking and you stink." Harry declared impatiently, his eyes dancing with amusement.

"You're not any better, Potter. See you in the Gryffindor Common Room," bid Cedric, pressing a button on his watch. In a blink of an eye, he disappeared. He realised that Winky had once again quietly taken the used towels and empty goblets away as he turned around to leave the gym.

He went to the library to check on Neville and discovered that he was still there, engrossed with his reading.

"It's getting late, Nev. Shouldn't you head back to the dorm?" asked Harry, amused. Neville became flustered when he read the time off his watch. He hastily placed the books he took back to their places in

the shelves. Harry, seeing that Neville had so many books, lent a hand.

"Are you sure you don't want to head to the Boy's dorm for a shower?" asked Neville when he finally stowed all the books. "I don't think anyone would mind."

"No. it's alright. There's a shower here in the Chambers, so I'll be using that. Winky will be bringing me everything I need, so you don't have to worry. I'll see you later." Harry assured.

Contented with Harry's answer, Neville portkeyed back to his dorm.

Seeing that he was now alone, Harry headed into the toilet for a much-needed shower.

Harry dressed carefully for the Ball, very conscious that it was not only the first time he and Hermione would be attending a formal event as a couple; they also had to open the dance. For the occasion, he picked custom-made charcoal velvet dress robes with silk lapels and a matching waistcoat to give him a sleek and more masculine look. He completed the outfit with sapphire dress studs, white gold cufflinks with the Potter's crest and a black neck cloth.

Harry wondered what colour her dress robes would be. Black was a safe colour since it was neutral and it wouldn't clash with her outfit but he could change the colour of his neck cloth later when he finally saw Hermione.

He double-checked his appearance using the full-length mirror in the room and was satisfied with the final outcome - he looked exactly like a rich and powerful Lord, down to his gleaming, black leather Oxford lace-up shoes. His short hair was left untouched since it was the way Hermione liked it most, and he grabbed the single red rose he'd taken the liberty to pick up for the Tri-Wizard Ball. Harry smiled when he put the finishing touches to the rose.

He put on the solid white mask that covered only half of his face and apparated upstairs into the Gryffindor Common room.

Harry stylishly descended down the stairs, as if he was just exiting from his own quarters to keep up with appearances. The common room was swirling with robes of different colours unlike the usual black mass. He spotted his friends standing near the stairs that led to the girls' dorm, waiting anxiously.

"Looking very sharp and mysterious, Harry," said Parvati, clad in dress robes of shocking pink. Harry returned an amicable smile.

"You look pretty," complimented Harry.

The smile on Parvati's face widened. "Thanks, Harry. I'll see you at the ball; my date's waiting for me." She cheerfully waved at him before exiting out of the common room. Harry grew uncomfortable, noticing that all the girls seemed to be staring at him, so he joined his friends.

Neville was pacing around the foot of the stairs, looking very nervous yet debonair in velvet dress robes of silver and matching slacks. He was wearing a silky dove-grey neck tie, completed by platinum cuff links embossed with the crest of the House of Longbottom. There was a silver demi-mask on his face. Upon closer look, he noticed the intricate sparkling patterns that surrounded the two holes for his eyes. His hair was gelled neatly back and he was glancing at the stairs at intervals of a few seconds.

"Nice robes, Nev. You look good." complimented Harry, appraising him. With all the training he had done between the two balls, he had certainly become more fit and attractive.

"You really think so?" asked Neville as he gave an edgy smile.

Harry nodded, clapping him on his back. "She's going to love it," said Harry, checking his watch. They were early. Girls began to descend from the stairs, looking fine in their dress robes. Harry noticed that most of them were not very innovative with their masks, choosing to wear plain demi-masks that matched the colour of their dresses. The common room started to empty as it approached seven.

"Where are Fred and George?" Harry inquired, absently.

"They're already waiting in the Entrance Hall with their dates, Angelina and Katie," said Neville, smoothing his robes.

Cedric, looking suave, dressed impeccably in tailored velvet dress robes of pearl white, waxen bow tie but black trousers, strode into the room. He chose to wear a white leather mask with leather cords criss-crossing at the sides. His brown hair was windswept and it enhanced his boyish charms.

"Wow, you two are a sight. Harry, I really like your mask," said Cedric grinning. "You look quite menacing with half of your face covered."

There was the sound of heels clicking against the steps of the staircase. The heads of the guys whipped in that direction and gaped.

Three beautifully dressed girls were walking down the stairs elegantly, with uneasy smiles on their faces. Harry only had eyes for one and she was standing on the right, looking really nervous. He felt his blood heating up at the sight of her.

Hermione had selected a snug satin dress robe of periwinkle blue that was floor-length. The brown hair at the side of her head was swept back, joining the rest of the brown shiny tresses that tumbled down to her shoulder. Her fringe was neatly parted and there was a thin band of sapphires on her crown, holding the hairdo together. She had worn an exquisite sapphire necklace and matching dangling earrings. Hermione was wearing a sparkling Venetian mask that was a sapphire blue with intricate silver wire meshes that outline the shape of the mask.

He removed his mask and stared at her. He could see the blush colouring her cheeks from the intensity of his gaze.

Harry had to remind himself to breathe and judging from the amused smile on her lips, he must have been gawking at her like an idiot. He strode forward, "My love, you're dazzling. I can't believe how gorgeous you look." said Harry huskily, taking both of her hands in his and raising them to his lips.

Her blush deepened and he could feel her pleasure at his sincere compliments. "You look quite dashing yourself, my Lord," whispered Hermione. "Or should I say, Phantom?" Hermione went on, looking at his unique mask meaningfully. She knew that he was obsessed with the poignant play, The Phantom of Opera, after watching it at the theatre one evening.

The smile on his face widened and he offered her the rose. "Thank you," said Hermione, as she fingered the black ribbon tied around the stem of rose. "How can you be complete without this?" asked Hermione playfully, smiling.

Harry wasn't really paying attention to her words, but rather her moving lips. Entranced by her smile, Harry leaned in, and their lips met in a passionate kiss.

When they drew inches apart from each other, she whispered against his lips, "I can assume that you like my outfit?"

"Absolutely," murmured Harry adoringly, stroking her cheeks.

"We're going to be late if we don't hurry." Hermione reminded, putting his mask on him and slipping out of his hold. "You guys were a fetching sight when you were standing next to one another dressed in a spectrum of neutral tones. Did you plan that ahead of time?"

Harry laughed uproariously when Hermione had pointed out, capturing the attention of the rest of his friends. Luna looked brilliant in a simple, unique, and shiny dress that seemed to change colour with each movement. Her mask was an outrageous and bold mix of metallic colours with platinum feather sprouting from the middle of the mask. Neville in his silver dress robes did not clash with his partner's outfit. Daphne, in satin dress robes of brilliant green, looked extremely beautiful. Cedric wasn't able to take his eyes off his girlfriend and draped his arm around her waist possessively.

"Gentlemen, Mione wants to know if we coordinated our colour scheme," said Harry humorously, looking at his friends. They were taken aback until they had a closer look at one another's outfit and they laughed. "Anyway, it's almost seven, we'll have to hurry."

"Ah, before I forget," said Harry, transfiguring his neck cloth into periwinkle blue so that it would match Hermione's outfit.

The three couples, hurried out of the Gryffindor common room, hand in hand.

The Entrance Hall was a myriad of colours as the students flocked around the place, waiting for the oak doors that lead to the Great Hall to be opened. The whisperings stopped, the moment they saw the three couples gracefully descending down the winding stairs. Harry felt Hermione's nails biting into his skin as her grip on his arm tightened. He leaned into her ear and whispered, "You're easily the most beautiful woman here tonight so you don't need to be nervous."

His warm breath on the shell of ear made her shiver and she smiled, albeit tensely. The student milling around the corridor wordlessly parted and allowed the three couples to walk past them towards the oak doors. The chattering returned with a vengeance and Harry caught some of the whisperings and realised that they were talking about them. Harry drew Hermione closer to him protectively as he led his wife through the crowd with his friends trailing closely behind them. He was poised to defend or attack, whatever the situation called for.

I'm certain that you've become more territorial this year, admired Hermione, with a smile of amusement on her face.

Harry lifted one of his eyebrows in surprise. "I had the impression I was always a bit protective of you." He had to lean very close to her so that she could hear him.

Hermione laughed brilliantly. "No, I'm usually the overprotective one. I worry about you all the time."

His eyes danced with amusement. "Yes, you wouldn't be my Hermione if you didn't worry about me at all. Maybe I should consider repenting from my reckless ways so that you won't have premature wrinkles on your forehead."

"Prat," exclaimed Hermione, hitting him on his chest. Harry held her hand to his chest as he chuckled. It was in this position that Fred, George, and their dates found them.

"Don't they look sweet together?" commented Angelina, smiling as she leaned closer to George.

"What else new?" commented George, his eyes gleaming with amusement. "No offence, Harrikins."

Harry laughed good-naturally, putting one of his arms around Hermione. "None taken." He glanced around and saw that Cho and her escort had joined them.

"Where is Susan? She isn't with you?" asked Fred, with a hint of impatience in his voice. Beside him, a bored Katie was talking to Angelina.

"No, she had to meet her date early," said Hermione, searching the crowd for any sign of the familiar red-headed. "I'm anxious to see who she's coming with."

A look of distaste flashed on his face before Fred willed himself to look bored.

Harry and Hermione shared a look of surprise.

A stunning young adult wearing dress robes of pale pink and an outrageous golden Venetian mask with intricate gold wires coiling to form a delicate angel wing at one side of the mask, walked elegantly to the front. Her brown hair tumbled down from her crown. Harry didn't recognise the professor until she spoke.

His eyes widened when he realised it was his Head of House, Professor Vector. With her hair down, and horn-rimmed spectacles missing, she looked entirely different. She called for the Champions and their partners. The crowd automatically parted and allowed the Champions and their dates to pass through. Harry and Hermione excused themselves from their friends and headed to the entrance of the Great Hall. It was then when they ran into Fleur. She was looking

stunning in a flowing silver satin dress and she smiled when she saw them. Behind her, was her date, Roger Davies.

Fleur couldn't believe her eyes when they fell on Hermione. Even she had to admit that the fourth year witch looked pretty when she chose to dress up. The French girl, to Harry's surprise, flashed an uncertain and apologetic smile at her, and was glad when Hermione returned one cordially. He didn't know what caused the change of attitude but he knew that the school was talking about how Hermione and he faced the Hungarian Horntail together. Fleur turned to look at Daphne, the reputed Ice-Queen of Hogwarts and measured her up in a glance. She wasn't surprised when Daphne appeared to be sizing her up with an equally icy gaze. Daphne dismissed her curtly after a while and she turned to speak to Cedric, who was hovering over her protectively, as if he was dying to catch her every word.

Fleur was outraged, unable to believe that there was a girl who could outclass her in terms of arrogance. Harry started sniggering, much to the surprise of everyone around him.

"I always wondered who'd win when the Ice Queens of the two schools finally met each other," explained Harry when he finally had control over his feelings. "Well, the outcome is quite clear."

The frown on her face cleared and she smiled, her eyes gleaming with amusement.

"Hogwarts seems to 'ave the 'aughtiest girls and a lack of acceptable guys." Fleur declared, tossing her sheet of silver hair.

"Then why are you with Davis?" asked Harry curiously.

She shrugged absently. "All ze good guys were taken. You are very lucky, 'ermione."

"Oh, I know I am," she said, smiling, looking meaningfully at Harry.

Once the Champions were in position to the side of the entrance, the rest of students were allowed to file through the oak doors and into

the Great Hall. They were told that when everyone had finally settled down, they would follow Professor Vector in a procession.

"The Durmstrangs are late," observed Daphne, as she watched the crowd surge into the Great Hall.

The front doors of the castle suddenly opened and everyone turned to look at the Durmstrang students briskly entering the castle, with Professor Karkaroff at the front. Like everyone else, they were wearing masks. At the back of the crowd, they saw Krum, dressed in midnight black dress robes, accompanied by a beautiful girl in a stunning golden dress robe. They seemed to be enjoying each other's company, laughing gaily.

Harry froze.

No. it couldn't be.

That couldn't possibly be Susan Bones with him.

But Harry knew he couldn't have made a mistake even though the girl was wearing a mask.

What was she doing with him?

"Hi, everyone," said Susan cheerfully when they joined them. Krum stiffened visibly when he saw Harry and Hermione together but he did manage to greet them politely. Susan was completely oblivious of the identical looks of shock on all her friends' faces. They hurriedly masked it with a smile and exchanged pleasantries cordially.

It was, however, clear from the eyes of the girls that they wanted to speak to Susan privately.

Krum ignored Hermione and Harry after greeting them, choosing instead to speak to Cedric.

Harry could sense Hermione's annoyance but he held her firmly and led her away. He believed that it wasn't the time to get their answers.

The Champions and the partners got into their lines of twos and waited for the moment when they would make their grand entrance.

When everyone in the Great Hall had settled down, Professor Vector led them into the Hall. A loud applause greeted them as they walked across the Hall to the large round table where all the judges were sitting. A buzzing, almost as loud as the applause, began when they noticed that Krum was accompanied by Susan Bones, a good friend of Hermione.

Harry and Hermione were so distracted by Susan's surprise appearance that they didn't notice the amount of effort the staff had placed into decorating the Great Hall for the Tri-Wizard ball. Small glowing Jack-O-Lanterns were floating around the Hall, lighting the place up. Large animated shooting stars seemed to fill the walls of the Hall. The ceiling reflected the clear, starry night outside, adding to the ambience of the room. The large House tables had disappeared and were replaced by many round tables that could seat a dozen.

Harry and Hermione did notice the judges when they approached. Professor McGonagall was decked in dress robes of tartan red, clapping politely as the Champions and their partners approached. She seemed glad that they were using the opportunity to mingle. Madame Maxime had exchanged her usual robes of black for a flowing dress robe of lavender silk. Bagman was wearing a robe of outrageous purple with bright yellow stars splattered across his robes and was clapping as enthusiastically as the other students. Professor Karkaroff narrowed his eyes when he spotted Krum and Susan together. Crouch was as brusque as ever, in dressed in midnight black dress robes, clapping politely.

The applause stopped when the champions and their partners reached the large table.

As if on cue, the male students sit their partners. Susan flashed a smile of gratitude when Krum slipped into the seat between her and Hermione. The empty glimmering golden plates and a small menu before them did not interest most of the teenagers on the table. Unable to take the suspense any longer, Daphne stood up hastily and grabbed Susan by her arm. Susan was shocked by the resolve

reflected in Daphne's icy blue eyes and was allowed herself to be led away. Susan only had time to mutter a hastily excuse to her partner before she was almost dragged out.

Krum looked befuddled by the sudden exit of his partner until Hermione turned to him.

"Viktor, could you spare a moment?" asked Hermione, with a hint of impatience in her voice. He nodded warily, afraid of the dangerous gleam in her eyes.

Hermione turned to Harry. Winding her arms around Harry, she kissed him soundly on his lips. "I'll be back soon. Order something first," whispered Hermione quietly. Harry nodded, aware of his slightly red cheeks which was a result of her sudden display of affections. Hermione kissed him again, this time chastely on the corner of his lips, before she stood up and walked across the Great Hall, with Krum trailing behind.

He noticed that they had all the attention when they disappeared out of the Hall together. Harry had no doubt that they were guessing the reason behind the sudden departure of Daphne, Susan, Hermione, and Krum. The night seemed to be very promising for gossipers.

If the adults at the table were astonished with the hasty exit of the four teenagers from their table at the start of the Ball, they did not show it; they were speaking their orders to their dishes after scanning through the menu, and food began to magically appear on their plates. Harry idly ordered lamb chops, aware that Fleur was looking emphatically at him.

Daphne led Susan upstairs, to the dark and deserted hallways of the second level before she finally let go of Susan's arm.

"Why did you drag me out?" demanded Susan angrily, rubbing her wrist. She was looking forward to the dinner at the Tri-Wizard Ball.

Daphne spun around and gave her a levelled look. "Why didn't you tell us that you were going with Viktor?" asked Daphne icily. "You know that things between Hermione and Viktor are very complex.

Have you ever considered that he might be using you to get back at Hermione?"

Susan held her gaze wordlessly, with a frown of annoyance marring her face.

The staff had pulled no stops at decorating Hogwarts for the Tri-Wizard Ball. They had even decorated the grounds. A giant glowing Jack-O-Lantern stood in the middle of a lawn, lighted up by millions of fairies residing in it. Scattered around the grounds were clusters of rose bushes, lighted up by fairies of many colours. The warm glow from the plants, with the backdrop of the forest, and the starry night added to the ambience of the place. There were grey stone benches for students to rest if they chose to come out for some fresh air. However, Hermione was not in the mood to admire the scenery. She halted suddenly, when she felt that they were a good distance away from the castle, and wheeled around to glare at Krum.

"Did you invite Susan to spite me?" demanded Hermione, her tone chilly like the night air. She wanted things to be kept simple and short.

Viktor seemed to be unaffected and even appeared to be amused. "Susan vos right, you're protective of your friends." There was a hint of admiration in his voice.

"You haven't answered the question, Viktor," said Hermione briskly.

"No, Susan is here as friend." Krum answered, his tone solemn.

The tight fist that was clutching over her heart unclenched itself. She was relieved - Viktor wasn't using her good friend to get back at her. Hermione wouldn't have been able to forgive herself if she was the cause of her friend's pain.

Krum peeled the raven mask from his face. "Susan is a nice girl. Vhen I first ask her, I wanted to make you jealous," admitted Krum honestly. "But not anymore."

She was shocked by his admission. The intensity of his gaze unnerved her and she turned away.

"Hermy-own-ninny," he began passionately, stepping closer to her. "I never felt the same way for anyone else. I like you from the first time I met you. I felt jealous when I saw you and Harry together, angry that he allowed Fleur to treat you that way. You're just too good for him."

The red headed girl looked slightly affronted at her words but she answered in an even tone, "I did. I knew that Viktor had a crush on Hermione and Hermione only has eyes for Harry. I was aware that Hermione rejected him when he asked her to the ball – why wouldn't she turn him down? I also knew that he might've asked me to make her feel jealous. I made it clear that if he was serious about asking me to the ball, we'd be going as friends. "

"Friends?" echoed Daphne, looking at Susan as if she had grown another head.

"Yes, he needed a friend. He reminded me of the way we were before we found one another. Sure, we were always surrounded by people before we became friends, but we were still feeling lonely because no one wanted to be friends with just us," explained Susan. "He'll make a good addition to the group when he gets over his whole crush on Hermione."

Daphne smiled. It sounded like the Susan she knew well. "You know, Sue, you're not any better than those fan girls. Who was the one who got so excited when Krum arrived at Hogwarts? Who was the one who wanted her partner to be on a Quidditch Team?" teased Daphne.

With narrowed eyes, Susan answered, "You're mean, Daph." Daphne chuckled brightly at her answer.

"You still haven't answered my question. Why didn't you tell us that you were going with Krum?"

"I knew you guys would kick up a fuss when you all found out about it and someone would've confronted Viktor, thinking that he invited me to spite Hermione. Things between us would've become uncomfortable," explained Susan patiently.

Daphne raised one of her eyebrows in surprise. "What difference would it have made? We would've found out eventually."

"It made a huge difference, actually. We've had the chance to know each other better in these weeks and I prepared him for the confrontation with Hermione today, so it wouldn't be as awkward." said Susan. "We were joking about it when I told him," added Susan, smiling. Her tone grew sombre. "I hope for Harry and Viktor's sake, she'd clear the air with Viktor."

Daphne laughed. "If Hermione's confronted Viktor just as you'd expected, then she might be doing just that."

The two girls returned to the Ball downstairs.

He was looking at her expectantly, waiting for her answer.

"And you think you're good enough?" A gleam of resolve flicked in her eyes as she held his gaze. "I'm sorry," offered Hermione. "That came out rudely." She took a step back when Krum advanced closer to her, trying to persuade her. A hint of steel entered her voice when she spoke again, leaving no room for misinterpretation of her intention. "Viktor, please listen to me. I'm sorry if I have misled you by any means, but I don't like you that way. I love Harry and we're serious about each other. If I were seventeen, this would be an engagement ring, not a promise ring." Hermione lifted her left hand for him to see.

His eyes flickered to the physical reminder of Harry's love for her on her finger. The haunted look on his face made her feel sorry for him. "I need to get back inside. Harry's waiting for me. I hope we can still be friends." Hermione said sincerely, turning away hastily, and hurrying back to the warm castle.

Viktor's jaws stiffened as he clenched his fists. He couldn't believe that he was rejected even after baring his heart to her. Upset, he punched the stone sculpture with all his might, welcoming the physical pain that jolted through his body.

Satisfied that he had his feelings under control, he whipped out his wand from the inside of the dress robe and healed his bleeding fist. He wore his mask and slouched back into the Castle.

Daphne and Susan returned first, looking as if nothing had happened between them. Susan didn't seem astonished that Hermione and Krum had disappeared.

Harry knew that Krum had just declared his affections for his wife and he was furious. He had anticipated it but he was still annoyed. However, he trusted his wife to do the right thing, the same way his wife trusted him, so he chose to busy himself by engaging a conversation with Fleur and Davis.

Hermione returned after a while, looking grim. He ordered a pork chop for her when she slipped her seat. She took a deep breath, knowing that she had to tell him.

"Harry, Krum expressed his feelings for me outside and I've made it clear to him I don't feel the same," whispered Hermione. Harry reached out and held her hand, rubbing her hand with the pad of his thumb soothingly. Hermione gave him a small smile that didn't seem to reach her eyes.

"I thought you'd be doing a victory dance since I rejected him," murmured Hermione.

"I can tell that you've a very high opinion of me," teased Harry, grinning.

She gave him a genuine smile. "Compassion for an admirer has never been your strong suit," whispered Hermione, lacing her fingers with his.

"No, it isn't," admitted Harry, shrugging. "Yet, I know that you feel terrible for hurting him." Harry admitted, kissing the back of her hand fondly. Hermione leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek tenderly.

Harry entertained Hermione about his different ideas of dressing for the Tri-Wizard Ball as she ate, one of which was to dress as The Mask, complete with the green face, yellow suit, and yellow hat. The only thing that stopped him was that he didn't think it was appropriate for him to dress that way when this was the first time they were appearing at a formal event as a couple. Hermione was quite amused that Harry actually practiced the American Swing.

Viktor joined them at the table, looking unaffected. They could see the relief on Susan's face when she spotted the Bulgarian. She immediately leaned into him when he joined them at the table and soon had him laughing at some inside joke.

Susan's positive and lively disposition was a trait he admired most in his good friend.

Sue is here with Viktor as a friend, commented Hermione, watching Harry closely for his reaction.

Harry appeared to be indifferent. I can tell. Otherwise, Daph would've turned her loose. She's quite protective of Sue too, answered Harry. The thought that the Ice-Queen being protective of someone else made Hermione smile in amusement. Besides, I heard what Krum said to you.

Is it so difficult to address him by his first name? I address Fleur by hers. It shouldn't be too hard- after all, he can address you by your first name, teased Hermione.

Yes he did, but he used my first name with much malice in his voice, added Harry. I think I prefer being addressed by my last name coolly if it were up to me to decide.

The round tables were cleared away when all the food from the glittering golden plates had disappeared. A platform with a drum set, a guitar, a cello, bagpipes, and organ appeared on the right side of the Hall. The Weird Sisters, a famous group of singers in the Wizarding World took the stage as the students wildly cheered.

They picked up their instruments and the light at the other tables went out.

Harry, anxious of making the Tri-Wizard Ball a memorable one for his wife, smiled brilliantly at her as he gallantly offered his hand. "Would you honour me with the first dance?" asked Harry formally.

Amused, she took his hand.

They gracefully walked to the centre of the Great Hall, their eyes never leaving each other. Around them, the other champions and their partners were also on their feet.

The Weird Sisters struck up a slow and mournful tune.

His hand slipped around her waist and took one of her hand in one practiced movement as they drew close to each other. Their bodies were almost touching each other as they twirled around the room to the harmonious music. It was a rhythm that they were very familiar with, a routine that they enjoyed. Cheek to cheek, they waltzed to the tune, graceful like swans, flawless in their well-practiced steps.

It was simply breathtaking to watch two people moving as one body, gliding magnificently. It was as if they could read each other mind well, and they didn't even miss a step despite adding very complex routines to the waltz. Everyone could tell from the identical smiles on their faces that Harry and Hermione enjoyed dancing with each other.

Harry didn't seem to be able to take his eyes off her since they started dancing.

Harry enjoyed the elegant way she held herself as they spun around. He tried to surprise her occasionally with more complex moves but Hermione was brilliant enough to execute them with great poise. She was so enthralling and it was making it very difficult for him not to draw her even closer so that he could snog her senseless in front of everyone.

He was proud that she was his.

Harry was aware of the way the constant compulsion to kiss, to touch, and to hold her, seemed to be licking his belly like flames.

Dancing seemed to do his wife a lot of good. She grew relax and untroubled. When the first song had finally ended, and the hall burst into applause, he encircled her with his arms and kissed her until her brain grew too fuzzy with passion to think straight.

"I'll take a rain-check," said Hermione breathlessly when he tried to kiss her again. It's still early to be this carried away.

"That's a good idea," Harry agreed huskily. "We did intend to dance all night."

Harry led her away from the dance floor to the seats so that they could cool down. The night was still too early for them to exit. The other Champions and their partners were still on their feet, dancing joyfully to a faster tempo. This time, the staff and the rest of the students had joined the champions on the dance floor. Harry and Hermione sat there, watching their friends dance happily as they playfully entwined their legs together. They smiled when they realised that their friends truly enjoyed dancing. Luna was at the centre of attention with her shiny and unique dress that gleamed whenever Neville twirled her. Neville was grinning from ear to ear as he danced, as if he was the luckiest guy alive. It was a foregone conclusion that Neville would be with Luna one day.

Harry and Hermione leaned into each other as they watched their friends, contented. The large smile on Susan and Viktor's faces made Hermione happy - they were truly enjoying themselves. Harry was surprised that Krum actually had some rhythm despite being so ungraceful on his feet. Harry smiled when he spotted George and Angelina - they were dancing so wildly that the people around them had to give them a bit more space in fear of being trampled.

He frowned and searched the Great Hall carefully for his other friend and he finally spotted Fred, sitting a few seats away from them, looking really glum. He was staring at Susan and Krum with narrowed eyes. It was really out of character for him not to be in thick of things.

In the corner, Hagrid was enjoying himself with a dance with Madame Maxime. He knew that Hagrid was actively pursuing her whenever he was free. Anything that made his first friend happy was alright with him. The second song was soon over and their friends returned so that they could exchange partners. It was an agreement between them to exchange partners until everyone had danced with each other.

They reluctantly parted with their own dates to pair up with others. Since Susan had promised Fred a dance, she chose to go with him, much to Katie's delight. She couldn't stop smiling when the Bulgarian Quidditch Star led her to the dance floor.

Fred seemed to be very unhappy when he guided Susan to the dance floor. It was clear from her smile that she had enjoyed her dance with her date. They sub-consciously fell into a memorable routine as they danced. It wasn't as jerky and uncomfortable as they first began. Over the two weeks of daily dancing, their bodies have grown familiar to the tempo of their dance; they could match their movement nicely without even thinking.

Susan raised an eyebrow enquiringly when Fred appeared to be stoic.

"Is something wrong?" asked Susan as they twirled to the tune.

Her cheeks were pink with exertion. Fred had never thought that she was a beautiful girl until he saw her tonight.

"No, not at all," answered Fred bitingly.

She narrowed her eyes. "I don't deserve such rudeness from you."

"You know why I'm annoyed," answered Fred. Despite his anger, they didn't miss a beat.

"No, I don't," insisted Susan firmly. "Tell me, Weasley."

"You proved me wrong. I thought you were better than those girls who are just obsessed with his fame." Fred snapped, his face turning

as red as the roots of his hair. "Apparently you're not, and you know as well as I do he's using you to get close to Cedric and Harry."

Her cheeks grew flustered with outrage.

"So you think I'm no better than a fan-girl?" Susan demanded heatedly. If Fred was not clouded by his emotions, he would have backed off immediately.

"Well, you behave no better than one. You were smiling and laughing as if you really enjoyed his company," accused Fred.

"For your information, I do enjoy his company. He's fun to be with. I must've been hit by a Confundus charm for thinking you were becoming more tolerable," growled Susan, letting go of his hand and stomping on his feet angrily. "Viktor has never asked me a single thing about Harry and Cedric and we're here as friends!"

Fred howled in pain as he watched Susan stormed off in rage - he didn't know which hurt more, the physical pain or Susan's biting tone.

Beside him, his twin brother and Luna stopped dancing suddenly.

"You're really an idiot," commented George in annoyance, watching Susan disappear out of the Hall. Neville dashed after his good friend after muttering some hastily apology to Angelina.

Fred did not look slightly repentant; he stuffed his hands into his pocket and walked away to sulk in a corner.

Neville was quick and he was able to catch up with Susan as she dashed down the flight of stone steps. "Sue, please wait," said Neville. He was glad that she had turned around when she heard him.

"I just need fresh air. I'll be alright. Why don't you return back to the Ball?" Susan suggested.

"How can I enjoy myself when I know one of my best friends is out here upset?" asked Neville, smiling as he took her arm and led her

down the path winding between the clusters of roses. "Let's get that fresh air together," continued Neville.

Susan smiled gratefully as they fell in step, admiring the wonderful night of a night in fall.

They strolled around the grounds wordlessly with their mask undone. Susan was glad that Neville offered his companionship, with no questions asked. She was certain that since he was so far away, he couldn't have possibly overheard their conversation and was glad that he would give her some time to herself.

"I'm really fine, Nev," said Susan, smiling sweetly when she felt completely at rest. "Thanks for choosing to come after me. I know I haven't been much company," added Susan as she played with the strings of her mask.

Neville chuckled. "It's always a pleasure to spend time with you especially when you're looking like this. You really look beautiful tonight." Neville offered sincerely and the smile on her face grew larger.

"Thanks, but so does Luna. Have you told Luna that tonight?" teased Susan, as they turned around and made their way back to the castle.

It was adorable to see Neville turning completely red and Susan laughed brightly.

"You really should, it'll make her very happy." Susan advised, entranced by the way the glowing fairies seemed to flutter around them.

He scratched the back of his head nervously. "I know. I just can't seem to get the words out of my mouth."

"Don't think too much about it and you'll be fine," said Susan. "You're a Gryffindor, aren't you? Well, muster up that courage, and go straight up to her and tell her." Susan added with gusto.

Neville laughed brilliantly at her antics. "Harry really puts us to shame by making gathering one's courage look like a simple walk in the park."

"That's really true but Luna's hardly a dragon you need to tame," replied Susan with laughing gravity, shaking her head. The Ball was still going full swing when they returned to the Great Hall. Only their friends seemed to notice that they had disappeared for a while.

Their friends heaved a sigh of relief when they saw Susan and Neville moving across the Great Hall, with smiles on their faces, towards them. They spilt ways to join their respective partners, Luna and Viktor. The worried frown on Viktor's face cleared when Susan explained what happened to him. Luna seemed to be glad that Neville took the initiative to accompany her. Viktor's thick brow contracted when Fred approached Susan and asked for her forgiveness.

"If Susan was anything like those fans, she wouldn't be here with me," said Viktor gruffly, staring at Fred as he placed himself between them.

"Thanks for clearing that up." Fred muttered, shuffling off to the corner to indulge himself in some Butterbeer. It was unlike for Fred to be this cantankerous but Susan did not want to spoil her night thinking about him.

"You like her, don't you, Fred?" asked Luna dreamily as she sat in the empty seat beside him and took a bottle of Butterbeer.

"Are you kidding, Luna? How could I possibly like a girl like her!" Fred exclaimed loudly. Luna ignored his outburst and looked at him knowingly – Fred doth protest too much. Even as he was sitting by himself, drinking Butterbeer, he was watching Susan out of the corner of his eye. She was smiling again as she danced, this time with Harry.

"Fred," she began patiently, after a while, "If you like her, then you'd better that you make your intentions known. I believe she will not have a lack of suitors."

Fred laughed a hoarse, mirthless laugh. "She has already no lack of suitors," replied Fred quietly.

"Well, I don't want to sit around, Fred. I think they're having a lot of fun. Shall we dance?" asked Luna. "I'll promise I won't step on your feet," added Luna innocently.

Fred chuckled. "You're already a better dancer than I am. I don't think you'll be the person making the blip."

Her eyes twinkled with gaiety. "We shall see," said Luna. Fred took her hand and led her to the dance floor. It turned out that neither of them made any errors because of all practice they got before the Ball. The teenagers spent most of the night dancing away with their friends until everyone had a chance to dance with each other.

It was very late at night when Harry and Hermione finally entered their bedroom. They had been sneaking kisses as they headed back to their quarters with Luna, unable to take their hands off each other. Luna did not seem to mind, and even appeared to be glad.

"Have I told you how breath-taking you are tonight?" Harry asked huskily, removing his neck cloth as he watched his wife closely, admiring the fine lines of her slim body. His dress robes were carelessly discarded to the side. She tore the mask from his face so that she could look at the face of the boy she loved so much.

"Oh, maybe once or twice, but not nearly often enough," whispered Hermione, kissing the corner of his lips teasingly as she tossed the mask aside. The ghost of a smile hovered on his lips. Harry untied the strings that were holding her mask and carelessly threw it aside, gazing into her eyes. "But I've noticed the way you've been watching me," continued Hermione, spreading fleeting kisses on his jaw.

"Mione," he moaned when she laid a trail of light nipping kisses from ear to ear, across his Adam's apple to playfully arouse him. Before she was wrapped in his crushing embrace, she nimbly dodged his arms, a teasing smile on her lips.

He blinked continuously as he stared at Hermione.

She reached back and removed the pins from her hair, so that her hair tumbled around her shoulders. Hermione absently tossed the pins aside and found his lips blindly. He returned the kiss with a demanding insistence that sent a jolt rocketing through her, exploding along every nerve until she was clinging to him, her arms wrapped fiercely around his neck. She boldly touched her tongue to his lips and her world exploded with the violence of his response. His arms went around her, crushing her firmly to him as his mouth opened over hers, her lips parted in eager anticipation. His tongue plunged into her mouth and their tongues were engaged in a fierce and ardent dance of domination as they stroked and touched each other.

He shifted his hands possessively across her back and down her spine, feeling her shiver with pleasure at his touch, then lower to cup her buttocks, moulding her closer to his thighs, forging their two bodies into one.

Hermione gasped at the contact, feeling the proof of his desire for her pressing hard against her. She slid her hand inside his shirt and upwards along his chest, feeling the way his muscles quivered and leapt at her touch.

"Mione," he breathed in a ragged breath, sliding his lips down her neck, sending shivers of delight up her spine, glorifying in the sensations that she evoked with her touch. He felt her hands fumbling wildly with the buttons of his shirt and he lent her a hand. His dress shirt was soon discarded, leaving his torso bare. Hermione replaced her hands with her lips, laying a trail of scalding kisses down his neck, his chest, his abs, and lingered teasingly above the waistline of his slacks.

Harry dragged her up and along his body, so that their lips could fuse in another passionate kiss as he unzipped her dress robes. The satin periwinkle dress slid seductively down her slim body and pooled around her ankles, leaving her clad in her bra and underwear. He felt her unbuttoning his slacks and dragging it down so that they were in similar states of undress.

Their gaze met heatedly.

Some semblance of logic returned to him.

"Are you sure?" asked Harry huskily, stroking her flustered cheeks. I don't think I'll be able to stop myself if we go any further.

Hermione let out a throaty chuckle and pressed her body onto his, wound her arms around his neck and kissed him fervently.

Harry swung her into his arms, their lips locked with each other passionately. Together, they tumbled into their large bed. He touched and caressed her throughout, his eyes never leaving hers, as he watched and felt the sensations he evoked with his hands.

Every slight movement of her body twisting beneath his gentle assault – every sound she made raced through his bloodstream like an aphrodisiac. He could not believe the violence of his body's craving for her; he was ravenous for her. Her hands were tangled in his hair, then running over his shoulders and back, her nails digging into his flesh as she writhed and trembled. Their underwear was soon hastily discarded in a frenzy to see each other completely.

His eyes flashed with lust as he beheld her, admiring the gentle contours of her body, lush in all the right places. He felt the flame racing through his veins and he replaced his hands with his mouth.

Hermione moaned at the sensations vibrating through their bodies. Her mind was completely blank and she was completely at the mercy of his caresses and kisses. He captured her mouth in a deep, consuming kiss as he gently, inexorably, parted her thighs and found her to be ready for him.

Hermione was awakened from the sensual whirlpool that was sweeping her towards sweet oblivion as she felt her hips lifted to receive him. He cast the spell that would prevent her from getting pregnant.

He moaned with pleasure when he felt his probing hardness coming into intimate contact with her. His pleasure was soon replaced with the sharp pain that was coursing through her body and he halted his

actions. He saw the pain reflected in her eyes and he tenderly kissed her lips.

"I'm sorry, Angel. It'll only hurt this time," he whispered in a ragged breath, kissing her ear tenderly. He kissed the corner of her lips lovingly before he kissed her long and lingeringly, with all the aching tenderness in his heart, waiting for the discomfort of having him in her pass. He felt her locked her arms around his neck as she responded eagerly to his kiss.

After a while, he felt the pain diminishing.

She was lost in incoherent and nameless yearnings to have him inside of her like this forever, to draw him somehow deeper. Curiously, she moved slightly, evoking a groan from Harry. He began to move cautiously and slowly in her, letting her set the pace until she ceased to think at all. Something small unfolded in the pit of her stomach, then spread like a mellow glow, slowly building and gathering force, until it began to race in a trembling fury along her every nerve. She began arching to meet his plunging thrusts. She kept her eyes open, as fascinated by the intensity of his stare as the silvery ripples of sensation that pumped through her body.

Sweat dampened his forehead as he fought down the demands of his body and continued to move slowly within her, watching her face. Her head tossed on the pillows as she strained towards him in trembling need, pressing her hips hard against his thighs, reaching for the bursting fulfilment. He heard her frantic gasp and steadily increase the tempo of his thrust.

A shivering ecstasy pierced Hermione's entire body, sending streaks of pleasure curling through her that came faster and faster until they erupted in an explosion that tore a scream from her throat. Harry bent his head and kissed her one last desperate time, and then he drove into her one last time, joining her in sweet oblivion.

Afraid that his weight would crush her, he moved to the side, pulling her with him, his body still intimately connected with hers.

They were finally joined in the soul and body.

A/N: Thank you for your reviews. I know I haven't made time to reply because of the crazy week I had. I've taken some of the suggestions and I started to back up my work. Hope you'll have a blessed week.

Chapter 34

Beta-read by Frustr8dwriter

Many thanks to Ghostchicken for her reviews

He was slumbering peacefully when he felt a heavy weight settling on his chest. It couldn't have been his wife since she was snuggled up to his side.

Harry. An unfamiliar voice spoke in the shared awareness and he cracked an eye groggily.

He found pair of large yellow eyes boring into his. Harry slightly jerked in shock as his eyes widened.

It took him a minute to register that it was Crookshanks.

He was purring loudly, swishing his bottle tail in an impatient manner.

"Crookshanks," grumbled Harry groggily, shutting his eye, hoping that the cat would take the cue and leave him alone. "It's barely morning."

Crookshanks could be very tenacious when it came to feeding time and he displayed his stubbornness by brushing his bottle tail under Harry's nose.

Harry groaned in irritation and swatted the tail away before falling back to sleep, ignoring the half-kneazle. He felt Hermione burrow closer to his side.

Harry could feel Crookshanks' annoyance as if it were his own and that was the only warning he got before Crookshanks kneaded his bare chest with his sharp claws.

"Ow!" He shouted as he leapt out of his warm bed and glared at the cat. "Why'd you do that?" Harry demanded in a quiet voice, afraid to wake Hermione up. She stirred but did not awaken. Crookshanks folded his paws beneath his large body as he met Harry's glare boldly.

Harry could tell that Crookshanks was not feeling the least bit remorseful; in fact he was downright smug that he won in the battle of the wills and managed to force Harry out of his bed. You can go back to sleep after you've given me my breakfast.

Harry gave a tired yawn as he walk to his wardrobe.

I could cheerfully murder you, Harry thought in frustration, throwing on a pair of pants so that he could go to the sitting room to feed the cat.

My mistress wouldn't be too pleased if you killed me. Anyway, you can go back to sleep. I'll just wake mistress up. I just thought you'd rather I wake you up instead of the mistress. After all, she's awfully sore and tired from last night's activity.

He halted in his action and spun around to stare at the cat. His mind was reeling from the conclusion Crookshanks arrived at.

It didn't make sense because it was much too early in the morning, yet the facts pointed to that direction.

They could obviously hear and feel each other's thoughts and feelings so that meant that Crookshanks also shared a familiar bond with them.

Hurray, said Crookshanks sarcastically. Now, give me some food. He leapt off the bed with an agility that was unusual for his size and followed Harry out to the sitting room.

There was just something different about Harry and Hermione and Susan couldn't seem to put her finger on it. She watched them closely, akin to a hawk eying its prey, and tried to put in words the change she detected in the couple.

Maybe it was the way their shoulders were propped against each other in an intimate way that was definitely absent the day before. Besides, there was plenty of space at the table so there was no excuse for them to sit so close.

Maybe it was the way Harry's eyes gleamed as he openly admired Hermione from the side as she read one of her trademark books – a huge and thick tome. Was it lust she saw in his eyes?

All she was certain of was the thick underlying tension between them and that Hermione appeared to be fighting it. Susan was certain that she had not flipped a page for the past ten minutes.

Harry hardly paid any attention to his friends sharing the table with him since he was preoccupied with observing her. Harry couldn't help but to think about last night, how their soul bond made the union of their bodies so right and how addicted he was to her. He would've been eager for a repeat performance if he didn't know that she was aching from last night.

He watched her lips intently, recalling vividly how they branded him with scalding kisses last night, and the sensations they evoked from him.

Harry, would please you stop it. I'm trying to read, commented Hermione in mortification as she grew flustered, not lifting her head from her book.

A mischievous smile stretched across his face.

You're so irresistible, cooed Harry huskily as he tenderly stroked her cheek with his hand, unable to restrain himself from touching her any further. She lifted her head finally and their gazes met - she found herself entranced by the smouldering look on his face.

Harry wrapped one of his arms around her waist and pulled her closer. His mouth swooped upon hers, capturing her lips in a fiery kiss that blanked her mind completely. Hermione went limp in his arms as she wound her arms around his neck so that their bodies were fused together and kissed him back ardently.

Susan did not know why Hermione's cheeks had pinked suddenly but she could tell that it had to do with Harry – a cheeky grin appeared on his face. To Susan's surprise, he pulled Hermione close for a really steamy make-out session.

Susan averted her eyes immediately to give them the privacy they needed as her cheeks grew flushed at their ardour and she heard someone behind her exclaiming grumpily, "Merlin's beard, get a room!"

She knew that voice - it was Fred Weasley. Apparently, a night of rest did not sweeten his mood. He deliberately avoided her gaze as the twins walked past her.

"What have you done to our Harrikins and his Mione?" George teased, paying no attention to the way Hermione's eyes had narrowed dangerously at his use of her pet name.

Harry and Hermione had drawn away from each other slightly but Harry's arm was still around her waist possessively. "If I were you, I'd be very careful whenever I'm alone. Maybe you're starting to become too complacent as well. Perhaps a little training is in order," hinted Harry, with a feral glint in his eyes.

George needed no prompting. It was clear that he vividly remembered the incident in which they practiced sneaking on Fred to attack from the way the colour drained from his face. He docilely slipped into his seat as the other occupants at the table dissolved in laughter.

George joined in the laughter sheepishly.

"He had a point though, are you really our Harry and Hermione? Are you sure you're not a couple of imposters?" asked Susan cautiously.

Hermione and Harry chortled with amusement. "We most certainly aren't taking polyjuice." Hermione said with a laugh. "What gives you the impression that we're not ourselves?"

Before Susan could answer, George interjected. "I'm certain that neither of you are imposters. In fact, if I didn't know any better, I'd have assumed that the two of you finally had a rumpy-pumpy last night."

The entire table grew eerily still for a moment.

"Merlin, I knew it!" George shouted gleefully when he caught their brief and identical blushes. "It's about time!" exclaimed George, grabbing Harry by his hand and pumping it in a handshake furiously.

Their friends, much to the mortification of the couple, started cheering loudly and catcalling when Harry and Hermione did not deny George's allegations. The couple was very glad that they were the only foolish students who had gotten up early after last night's Ball. The Great Hall was unusually empty since most were still recuperating from the effects of the Tri-wizard Ball - even Cho was missing.

While Cho wasn't really considered to be in the inner circle of Harry's friends, she always joined them during mealtimes. No one minded since she no longer opposed Daphne and Cedric's relationship.

"So, how was it?" George pressed curiously. He ignored Hermione's offended look and stared at Harry imploringly.

Harry arched his eyebrows, surprised that George thought he would get an answer from him. Unfortunately, Harry couldn't stop the silly grin from spreading across his face at the thought of last night.

His friends burst out laughing.

Hermione shoved Harry's chest in embarrassment and turned away, much to the amusement of their friends.

"Now those girls can't claim that he needs a more experienced girl," added Luna dreamily.

Hermione's eyes widened in shock.

"This is just going to stay between us, isn't it?" asked Harry worriedly, anxiously searching the faces of their friends.

Daphne laughed. "Well, half of the school thinks that you've already done it."

Their other friends took a leaf out of George's book and teased them unmercifully for the rest of the morning - even Fred lightened up and partook in the fun. They spent the rest of the morning working on the different exercises that Professor Moody had suggested.

At lunch, most of the students were up and about, so the Great Hall was bustling with activity. The buzz grew louder when they entered the hall but they took no notice.

They were halfway into their lunch when Cho was seen walking across the hall towards them.

"Have you read the latest edition of the Witch Weekly?" Cho asked, sitting next to Cedric. "There was an article on you, Harry."

"Me?" echoed Harry in surprise as he watched Hermione pick up a copy and rifle through the pages. A large photograph of him and Krum glaring at each other icily with Hermione standing at a side watching them headed a short write-up. He recognised the photograph immediately; it was taken outside Champion's tent. The article was entitled "LORD GRYFFINDOR'S COMPLEX LOVE PROBLEM."

He leaned closer to Hermione and read the article.

Lord Gryffindor Harry Potter seems to be unfortunate enough to be committed to girl who can't seem to get enough of rich and famous wizards. Since the arrival of Viktor Krum, Bulgarian Seeker and Hero at last Quidditch World Cup, Muggle-born Hermione Granger has been toying with both wizards' affections.

Lord Gryffindor, whose life was littered with so many personal losses, will soon find himself suffering another emotional blow when he discovers that his girlfriend, an ambitious girl, has been meeting Krum in secret.

According to Eloise Midgen, a fourth year who frequents the Hogwarts Library often, the Bulgarian Seeker has been heading to

the library daily to seek out Hermione Granger's company since his arrival at Hogwarts and they were always seen hanging out alone.

The Bulgarian Seeker, who is openly smitten with the girl, couldn't take his eyes off her.

It is unclear why Miss Granger chose to accompany Lord Gryffindor to the Tri-wizard Ball held on Halloween's night, but she managed to get the obsessed Bulgarian seeker to invite her best friend, Susan Bones, Scion of House of Bones, to attend the Tri-wizard Ball making the love triangle even more complex and earned a declaration of love from the stoic star.

Mr. Krum and Miss Granger were seen leaving the Hall during the Tri-wizard Ball to speak to each other in private and the Quidditch star promptly confessed his feelings for her, insisting that he 'never felt this way for anyone' and that he was jealous of Lord Gryffindor.

It is unclear if Lord Gryffindor is aware of the special relationship between his girlfriend and his rival at the Tri-wizard Competition or if he's in denial about the whole affair, but one must wish that he bestows his heart to a worthier candidate in the future.

Harry scowled when he finished the article. Merlin's beard, Skeeter really has some nerve. She'd chosen to write about Hermione, a girl who appears to be not from any influential family, in a gossip magazine to get back at him. It was a smart move since he couldn't do anything about it.

Hermione handed the magazine back to Cho with a thoughtful look on her face.

"How did she know?" questioned Hermione, broodingly. "I heard that Professor McGonagall had banned the media from entering the castle after Skeeter wrote an article on you and Fleur."

"Well, she interviewed the students," said Harry absently.

"There wasn't enough time to do that," said Neville.

"She would've had to have been there to witness it, because she knew that contents of the conversation said in private. Besides, she couldn't have got that out of an interview. Did you notice anyone when you're in the garden?" Luna asked, sounding unusually alert.

"No, I did not see anyone," answered Hermione, a faint frown creasing her brow. "She couldn't have had an invisibility cloak, could she? Is Skeeter skilled enough to cast a disillusionment charm powerful enough to become invisible?"

"That Skeeter woman really has some nerve, portraying Hermione as two-timing fan girl!" exclaimed Susan hotly. "Besides, Viktor and I went only as friends – there was no love quadrangle."

"What are you planning to do, Hermione?" Daphne asked, looking at her friend. "You can't let her get away with this - she needs to be taught a lesson. Personally, I think she has served her usefulness and ought to be removed. That should be rather easy. "

"Yet, it wouldn't completely silence her. It will give her the resolve to keep digging and sully our reputations. No, I think I might have a better way of making her cooperate with us," said Hermione, her eyes gleaming. "However, I'll have to look into it some more."

"I'm sure Lady Bones will contact either you, Harry, or Hermione once she reads the article to get the full story," said Cedric. "Sue, I think she'll be very interested how you got involved with the mess and the relationship between Viktor and you."

Susan let out another sigh. "You all know that there wasn't anything to it at all. But I'll speak to her after lunch."

Their conversation soon switched to something more pleasant like the Tri-wizard Ball. Cho's date was apparently quite serious about her and they had arranged a date for the next Hogsmeade weekend.

After lunch, Hermione and Luna went to the school library to follow her hunch, leaving the rest of them to head back to the Chambers for some much needed physical training.

Most of them needed to catch up on their training since they had taken a break from it in order to prepare for the Ball.

Harry decided to spend some time in the House with Crookshanks since Edmund had been dying to meet the cat. Edmund was pleased to finally meet Crookshanks and liked his spunk. After the introductions, Toll worked with Crookshanks while Harry retreated to one of the rooms to test his theory on sounds.

He reasoned that if the wailings was some sort of a message, then the waves would change and there would be a kind of pattern. One of his instructors was fond of tinkering in his spare time, so he had improved on the non-magical device that could record sounds and display them on screens so that they could observe the waves. He plugged the golden egg to the machine to test his theory.

The ear-muffs shield him from the awful screeching as he watched the waves display on the screen. A large grin appeared on his face. The frequency and the pitches varied throughout, with a slight semblance of order - it was clear that it was indeed a message. All that was left to be done was to find a way to decipher it.

Harry then realised that this was the most difficult part of cracking the clue - he had no idea how to translate those waves into a message that he could understand.

Frustrated, he decided to take his golden egg for a walk around the grounds of Hogwarts for some inspiration. He took a leisure stroll around the Black Lake, admiring the picturesque scenery of the Castle with the golden egg under his arm. The sky was a flaming tangerine glow.

He did not know why this particular scene was so enchanting to him; maybe it was because the Hogwarts Castle was the first place he felt as home, or maybe it was due to the fact that he and his wife spent their first date admiring the castle, but he knew that it was significant to him.

He stood by the edge of the lake and closed his eyes, tuning his thoughts out and just appreciating the serenity of the moment. His

eyes shot open immediately, sensing that someone was approaching him and he braced himself for any attack.

Harry dropped his aggressive stance when he discovered it was only Viktor Krum. He was looking as cantankerous as ever. Harry pondered for a moment if he should greet him. After all, Susan and Hermione did view him as a friend.

"Viktor." Harry said finally, smiling stiffly.

"Harry Potter," answered Krum coolly in his thick Bulgarian drawl. He made no effort to hide his disdain for him. "I don't know why Hermione-ninny haf chosen you but you are not good for her." Krum saw him as a weak, spoiled aristocrat who was forced to join the competition and loved dragons far too much.

"So you think she'd be happier if she chose you?" asked Harry quietly, with an edge of annoyance in his voice. Harry squared his shoulders and stepped closer to him. "Krum, allow me to make things clear to you; Hermione's my girl and I would appreciate it if you'd stay away from her," continuing Harry brusquely, boldly meeting his wintry stare.

The need to re-establish the fact that she belonged to him was overpowering. He knew that was stupid since his wife had made it very clear to him that she wasn't interested in Krum and that it was bad for international relations but he couldn't help it.

Krum's face twitched with rage.

"So what are you going to about it?" goaded Krum. "You English Lords are only good at talking big. I von't allow her to be vith you. You can't even protect her from the media despite all your power. I still haff a chance," growled Krum furiously.

"And you think you can protect her, Viktor?" Harry asked coolly, his glare glacial. "Skeeter wouldn't have a chance to write about her if you hadn't confessed your feelings. Besides, Hermione is fully capable of defending herself. Don't try getting close to Hermione or you'll regret it," continued Harry ominously and he turned away.

It turned out to be the wrong move.

Viktor's fist shot out fast and powerful and caught him on his face.

Harry stumbled backwards, holding his eye with his free hand.

Harry saw stars as he teetered dangerously close to the edge of the lake. Unable to withstand the force, he fell backwards into the lake.

There was a loud splash as he crashed into the water.

Lights starred behind his eyes when his head rapped hard against some sharp rocks. Pain jolted through the point of impact. The blow knocked the wind out of him. He found his lungs protesting excruciatingly from the lack of air. The icy water was stinging him painfully like thousand of needles poking into his skin. He felt he was sinking in fire instead of icy water due to searing pain.

The golden egg slipped out of his hold and sank deeper and deeper into the abyss.

Harry panicked for a moment and tried to make a furious grab at it but the golden egg smashed onto some rocks and burst open.

Instead of wailing, it was a chorus of eerie voices singing.

"Come and seek us where our voices sound,

We cannot sing above the ground,

And while you're searching, ponder this:

We've taken what you'll sorely miss,

An hour long you'll have to look,

And to recover what we took,

But past an hour- the prospect's black

Too late, it's gone, it won't come back"

He nearly heaved a sigh of relief when he finally had a good grip of the egg, mustering all the strength he had, he gave a good kick and felt himself slowly moving upwards.

He gasped and greedily gulped the air into his oxygen-starved lungs when his head finally broke out of the surface of the water. His body was completely numbed with the cold.

He tried to get a firm grip on some rocks to pull himself out of the water, but his hand kept slipping off and he was too weak. Harry finally gave up after realising it was futile and tried to think of another alternative.

Everything was against him: darkness had fallen upon the place, making it difficult to see, his head was throbbing from the blow, he could only squint with an eye and he was feeling unnaturally cold and dizzy. The clothes were adding to the burden and his muscles felt so stiff that it was impossible to move.

What should he do?

He had to head to a shore, he thought, trying to think through the haze of pain and exhaustion in his mind. He was getting very fatigued. Using the lights from the castle to navigate, he swam towards the shore with excruciating slowness.

It took him a while to locate a gentle slope he could use to scramble out of the lake and he swam towards it. He could kiss the ground when he was on his fours, crawling out of the lake.

His breathing was shallow and he was shaking like a leaf as he dragged himself. He collapsed onto the ground, tired. He knew he was taking a risk but he had no choice. Desperately trying to fight his exhaustion, he shakily grasped his wand with his hand and cast a warming spell on himself.

Hermione, he said weakly, lowering his shield for a moment.

Completely exhausted, he collapsed by the lake, too weary to dry himself with a simple drying spell. He fought the darkness with all he had and the last thing he heard was the cracking sound of someone apparating.

"Harry!" shouted Hermione, her voice trembling with fear as she knelt beside him and lifted him into her arms. He felt like ice to her touch and she frowned.

The thought that he might have been attacked by the faithful Death Eater made her shudder in fear.

Harry had already passed out and was as pale as a sheet. She noticed that his breathing was very shallow and his lips and ears had a tinge of blue. His robes were completely soaked and there were deep gashes on his hands. When she touched the back of his head, she realised he was also bleeding profusely.

Hermione took several deep breaths and steeled herself to remain calm. Panicking won't help him, she thought.

Hermione maintained her composure as her brief medical training kicked in and she cast a drying spell and another heating spell, knowing that hypothermia was the most pressing problem.

His robes dried instantly but his body didn't respond much to her heating spell.

Worried, she cast again.

Suddenly, there was a blue and soothing glow enveloping them.

Hermione felt very relaxed, light, and strangely happy. It was as if she was floating on air.

Before her very eyes, the black eye began to fade and all his lacerations on his hands began to heal until it disappeared entirely, leaving only trails of dried up blood. He was slowly regaining colour and his body was slowly gaining heat.

The glow disappeared as unexpectedly as it appeared.

Hermione could only sit there silently, numb with shock. She felt Harry stir and she slowly helped him up.

"Mione?" asked Harry, groggily as if he had just awakened from a sleep.

"Are you alright?" Hermione asked anxiously, watching him closely.

He seemed perplexed at her question. "I'm fine, Mione," said Harry.

"Thank Merlin," she said as Hermione threw her arms around him and embraced him tightly. "You were bleeding profusely and you were suffering from a bad case of hypothermia. "You really scared me!"

Harry could feel torrents of relief flooding through her system.

He put his arms around her and kissed her head lovingly. "I'm sorry for worrying you," whispered Harry tenderly. His hands gently framed her face and he tipped her head so that their lips could fuse in a long and sweet kiss aimed to soothe her. The kiss became enthusiastic when she kissed him back with all she had. Her fingers entangled with his hair as she pulled his face close to her, their tongues engaged in a sensual dance for domination.

They drew away after a while, breathless and she pressed her cheek onto his chest as their breathing evened out. Harry took her robe off his back and helped to put it on her. The more clothes, the better, he thought to himself, not wishing to get too carried away. He felt strangely well for someone who nearly drowned and he asked her about it.

"There was a sudden blue glow and you were promptly healed," explained Hermione. "I'm not sure what triggered it, but I have a feeling it was our soul bond. You're not the kind who likes to take a dip with your clothes on. What happened?"

His face grew tight and bitter. "That git. He didn't even bother checking if I was alive after knocking me into the water with a punch."

"Who?" asked Hermione with concern lacing her voice. "A Death Eater didn't attack you, did he?"

"No," replied Harry, playing with her hair. "Krum did. He sucker-punched me when we had words. I stumbled into the water and hit some rocks. My egg slipped out of grip so I dove deeper to get it back. I swam towards the shore and dragged myself out. You know the rest of the story."

Hermione climbed onto her feet immediately and stalked towards the ship in the distance. He could feel her anger coursing through her body.

"Mione," he called, jogging after her. He stopped her by planting himself firmly in front of her.

"He could've killed you! I won't let him get away with this," hissed Hermione, trying to side-step Harry but he held her firmly by her shoulders. Hermione tried to shrug his grip off but Harry held on, his resolve clear in his eyes. She narrowed her eyes in anger and lifted her head defiantly so that their gazes would meet.

There was a belligerent look on his face.

"You're wrong. He could have killed both of us," replied Harry quietly. "Please allow me the honour of duelling with him."

There was a feral glint in his eyes and she could tell how much he desired to wring his neck with his bare hands. It was strange that he wasn't doing it for self-preservation but for revenge of nearly killing her. Because they are soul-bound, she would've died if Harry had drowned – his reaction was not unusual since it was Harry after all.

Her determination wavered slightly.

"I want to have at least a shot at him," replied Hermione finally, putting her foot down on the matter. "He hurt you."

"After I'm through with him, you may have what's left of him, milady," said Harry, his expression turning tender, he took her hands and pressed his lips to the back of them adoringly.

Suddenly, their stomachs growled.

There was a sheepish look on Hermione's face.

"I think healing takes a lot of energy," said Hermione, sounding slightly apologetic. Harry smiled.

"I think nearly drowning consumes a lot of energy," answered Harry. "The duel can wait till tomorrow. Let's head to the Great Hall." Hermione cleaned up the dried blood from his hair with a spell and they walked back to the Castle, hand in hand.

"Our friends might have some questions since I shifted to you without a thought," said Hermione, guiltily. "We were in the Chamber though, so we don't have to do much damage control."

Harry smiled. "Well, it's getting more difficult to keep our soul-bond under wraps. I can't count the number of times I nearly slipped. Anyway, it's alright. They aren't exactly stupid so they would've noticed some of our special abilities after a while."

Everyone was very worried for them and they overwhelmed them with questions the moment Harry and Hermione turned up in the Hall. They shook their heads and assured them that it wasn't the work of the Death Eater, knowing that the possibility was weighing heavily on their minds. The girls embraced him tightly; glad to see that he was alright. He could see the relief in their faces. Harry had to assure them he was fine many times and promise that he would explain in private after dinner before they would settle down and let him eat at peace. Harry was glad that Hedwig was asleep when everything happened so there was one less creature he had to reassure.

As promised, they retreated to the marriage quarters straight after dinner to give them the answers they desired. Fred had forgotten all

about keeping his distance from Susan, out of worrying for Harry and sat next to her. They eyed the Harry and Hermione closely after they had settled around the sitting room.

Luna spearheaded the interrogation for once. She had snapped out of her usual dreamily self and watched them intently. "If it wasn't the Death Eater, then what happened? Hermione said that you were working on your egg in private so where did you go?"

Harry took a deep breath before he recounted the entire incident to them.

All of his friends were seeing red when they realised that Krum had left him in lurch after knocking him into the water. He didn't need a violent love rival to kill him when Riddle has wanted to do that for many years.

"No, you won't do anything," insisted Harry firmly when some of his friends wanted to get back at him. "I appreciate your concern. He hasn't done anything to any of you, so none of you will interfere. There'll be no pranks," he said, looking at the Weasley twins meaningfully. "The matter should be kept between us. I don't want the matter to be blown out of proportion. I'll be the only one who will be demanding any satisfaction for this."

His friends backed down immediately, seeing that Harry was serious about it.

"The adults will want to know, Harry," said Hermione, disagreeing with him, turning in his arms to look at him. "They're family. Sirius, Uncle Os, Aunt Am, Uncle Moony, Mom and Dad should be told."

He drew his hair in frustration. "Don't worry, I'll tell them," relented Harry finally.

"Hermione, how is it that you can apparate?" asked Cedric, baffled. "You're not of age and I thought people can't apparate within Hogwarts. How did you find him?"

"How'd you know that Harry was in trouble in the first place?" asked Susan curiously.

Harry and Hermione exchanged looks and Harry kneaded her thigh, prompting her to answer them.

"Well, I didn't apparate. I shifted to him. The soul bond gives us the ability to appear at each other's side immediately and the ability to communicate with each other in our heads," explained Hermione. "The myth about soul-bonded mates being joined in the mind and the heart is true so we can hear each other thoughts and feel each other feelings."

Noticing the look of disbelief on their face, the couple decided to give them a demonstration of the shifting ability. Hermione climbed out of Harry's embrace and went to the next room while Harry remained in the living room. There was a crack and she appeared instantly by his side.

The room was completely silent by the feat and there were looks of awe on their faces.

"So you aren't pulling our leg? This explains a great deal. I've always wondered why Harry sometimes would suddenly laugh to himself," muttered Fred.

Some of them sniggered at his remark.

"Or why Hermione would hit him for no rhyme or reason." Susan added with a smile.

"This is a good thing because Hermione can rush to help you out of a jam. After all, trouble is your middle name." Daphne chided.

"If you are truly joined in the soul, mind, and heart, wouldn't that also mean neither of you can survive if one passes on?" asked Luna suddenly, detecting the problem immediately.

It was so silent in the room that one could hear a pin drop. He cocked his head, searching the faces of his friends. "Yes," said Harry quietly.

It was a fact that he was well-aware of. "Well, I wouldn't have it another way. I won't be able to go on without her in my life. Anyway, we have lessons tomorrow, so we should all have an early night. I still need to inform the adults about my close shave."

"Good luck." Cedric offered, clapping his back as most of them stood up to leave. They were also worn-out from their intensive work-out. The talk about their soul-bond had given them more insight into Harry and Hermione.

Harry went to the study alone to communicate with the adults as Hermione disappeared into the House, leaving him to deal with them alone.

When the adults learned what happened, they were just as livid about the situation as his friends. Harry quickly assured them that he would resolve the matter – he'd waited this long to get his hands on Krum. It took him longer to persuade the adults since they'd never had the privilege of standing up for Harry when he was younger.

He called Sirius last.

"I don't want to sound proud, but if I can't take him down after all the training I have done over the past two years, then all that time would've been waste. I definitely won't have a chance against Riddle." Harry declared when Sirius insisted on stepping in.

"It's unnecessary trouble, Pup and you should keep your abilities a secret," advised Sirius, frowning.

"It's not your fight, Sirius." Harry pointed out.

"Actually, it kind of is. The fact that he knowingly attacked a Head of Ancient House, he would've had to know that he wouldn't be let off the hook that easily. So, Skeeter didn't fabricate that part of it? He's really obsessed with Hermione?"

"Yeah," replied Harry gruffly. "It can't get through his thick skull that she's not interested in him that way."

Sirius laughed brightly. "It must have been really difficult for you and you really can't blame him for having such good taste. After all, Hermione's an attractive girl."

"Thanks, Sirius." He answered sardonically. "I'll keep you updated."

He closed the communication between them, headed for a shower before calling it a day.

He closed his eyes and let the jets of water pound on his body. Suddenly he felt another body pressing onto his back. The shower was turned down and he felt familiar hands massaging his shampoo into his hair. She was back from her visit to the House. "Mione, you don't have to do this," said Harry, enjoying her touch and the feeling of her contours against him.

"Just let me pamper you, Harry." Hermione insisted, angling his head back.

The spray began to pulse like a heartbeat, the water chasing the shampoo away.

Hermione lathered her hands with his soap that smelled of wild forests and slicked it up his chest, over his shoulders down his back, then around and up his chest, with a thoroughness that made his breath race.

Unable to resist, his body slammed onto her as the jets of water pounded his body, their lips met in a wild and desperate kiss. His mouth was hot and almost vicious. When all the soap from his body was gone, they dried each other with towels, with their lips still fused together.

They tumbled into their bed together, entangled with each other. They were much too tired to engage in intimate relations so they drew close to each other and turned off the lights.

Hermione was asleep as soon she spooned close to him, leaving Harry with his thoughts. He turned to her hair and took in her delicious and familiar scent and wrapped his arms firmly around her.

As he lay in bed pondering, he discovered that, ironically enough, if it wasn't for Krum, he wouldn't have found the way to solve the clue. It would never have occurred to him to put the golden egg in water.

Tired, he closed his eyes, took her hand, linked their fingers, and let himself slide into sleep with her.

By the next morning, everyone had already read the article from the Witch Weekly and was anticipating drama to unfold in the Great Hall, where all the students from all three schools would gather for their breakfast. For once the students were in luck because it did happen.

Harry sought Krum immediately at breakfast and found him at the Slytherin table, eating with his friends, looking as sombre as ever. He marched up to the Bulgarian seeker.

The Hall grew silent immediately at the impending meeting of the two love rivals.

"Good morning, Krum," said Harry coolly. The Bulgarian Seeker rose to his feet, meeting his glacial stare boldly. Harry had considered forgiving the seeker if he had repented but it was clear from his eyes that he wasn't remorseful for his deeds and it strengthened his resolve. "I considered forgiving you for a moment, but you don't deserve it. Unlike you, I'm more inclined to do this the aboveboard and right way." He concluded, his lips pulled back in a mocking grin.

"With all the students, staff in this Great Hall as witnesses, I, Lord Gryffindor, Head of the Most Noble and Ancient House of the Potter, declare a wizard's duel on you, Viktor Krum, for dealing me injustice. I demand the satisfaction of honour on a proper duelling platform, in full view of everyone so that you can't use any underhanded methods." Harry declared in a loud voice so everyone could hear him.

Krum laughed a roaring, spiteful laugh, unable to believe a boy as young and weak as Harry would call him out.

He's finally acting like a man, Krum thought. He had been aching to release his pent-up frustration. "When do you want this duel? Who is your second?"

"Lord Gryffindor and Mr. Krum," began Professor McGonagall sternly, standing up. "I want to speak to both of you now." She strode to the small room by the side and the two of them followed after her obediently.

The whisperings became loud after they entered the small room. It was the small room where the Champions gathered after their names were announced at the start of the school term.

Professor McGonagall looked absolutely furious.

"Even though I've heard about the mess that both of you are in. Who gave you leave to declare a duel on another student, Lord Potter? What injustice has he dealt to you?" demanded Professor McGonagall.

Professor Karkaroff barged into the meeting. It was clear that he was unhappy about the confrontation.

"What is this? It's an outrage for him to speak of Krum that way - Krum has a reputation of an International Quidditch Star to keep. I demand an apology!" Professor Karkaroff exclaimed loudly.

Professor McGonagall fixed that headmaster a cool stare.

"I'm looking into it right now. You'll have that apology if Lord Gryffindor is in the wrong." Turning back to Harry, she prompted, "Lord Gryffindor?"

"I was fortunate enough not to drown in the lake last evening when he attacked me suddenly, knocking me into the lake. Krum didn't even bother checking if I was alright, and pretty much left me to die. If Hermione did not come for me, I don't think I'd be standing here, talking to you," replied Harry.

Her eyes widened in shock. Turning to Krum, she demanded, "Was that true, Mr Krum? Did you attacked one of my students and leave him in the lake?" She ignored Professor's claims of Harry lying, watching the Bulgarian Star closely as he paled.

"Yes, I hit him," said Krum, averting his eyes. "I didn't think it was dangerous to leave him in the lake."

Harry raised his brows in surprise at this honesty. His opinion of the Durmstrang Champion was improving.

Her eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Of course not, if you could swim like a fish and you were falling into the middle of the lake during summer," answered Professor McGonagall sternly. "However, that isn't the case. There are jagged rocks at the edge of the lake, Mr. Krum. Lord Gryffindor could've lost his unconsciousness and drowned if he knocked into those rocks, good swimmer or not."

Krum hung his head in disgrace.

Professor Karkaroff opened his mouth to object but Professor McGonagall continued on as if she wasn't interrupted. "Mr. Krum, you've breached an important law in England for nearly causing the death of such an outstanding member of the society. It is an offence so severe that even your Prime Minister can't protect you from our laws if Harry chose to involve the relevant authorities," said Professor McGonagall gravely, turning to look at Professor Karkaroff meaningfully. From the way Professor Karkaroff's face had turned red with anger as he kept mum, proved that he knew the severity of the issue.

"I'll permit this transgression from you for the last time, Mr. Potter," she concluded, not liking her decision at all.

"So I have your permission to carry out this duel?" asked Harry.

"Yes," answered Professor McGonagall grimly. "I don't condone violence and Mr. Crouch will have his say in it, but I don't wish to see a foreign champion convicted. Knowing the other Heads, they would

choose to pursue the matter if it's not settled in your way. When will this duel be held?"

"What better time than now?" Harry suggested with a smile. "Let's change the rules a bit. What do you say to the idea of a non-magical duel? No wands, no magic, just fists."

Professor McGonagall arched her eyebrows at thought of a public display of such barbarism. Professor Karkaroff seemed to be happy with the suggestion. The brummagem actually thought he had a chance to beat Krum, thought Professor Karkaroff, smirking.

There was a fierce gleam in his eyes. "I would like that," seconded Krum. Wands were not as personal as fists.

"It's common in the non-magical world," Harry explained. "It's actually a sport. The rules are simple: who ever gets knocked out first, loses."

The tables at the Great Hall were cleared away so that the duelling platform would be conjured. Instead of the long duelling platform, it was a large square on. It looked almost like a boxing ring but without the fences.

There was a look of disapproval in Mr. Crouch's eyes but Harry ignored it. Professor Moody was asked to preside over this strange duel. Harry transfigured his clothes to something more suitable for the physical workout.

"It's not too late to back out, Harry Potter. You English lords are only good with words and not action. You might regret this," said Krum, transfiguring his thick blood red robes into a plain T-shirt and shorts.

"Haven't you heard? English Lords keep to their word and I don't back out." Harry retorted, warming up with a series of exercises.

They bowed to each other and the sparring began immediately. Krum may have doubts about Harry's ability but he honoured the duel by putting his all. His eyes widened in shock at Harry's agility. Harry nimbly dodged when he swung out at him, fast and hard, and

returned with a heavy blow to the jaw that made Krum stumbled backwards.

The girls whimpered at the sound of his fist connecting with Krum's face.

"That was very good," said Krum admiringly, after spitting out the blood in his mouth. His respect for Harry increased significantly. "So you're more than just some Dragon lover?"

Harry laughed brightly. "I would say so."

The Bulgarian returned a smile.

Harry continued to duck all of Krum's attacks, as if he could read Krum's moves, wearing the Bulgarian Quidditch Star out. Their shirts were soon soaked with perspiration and they clung tightly to their bodies, highlighting those toned muscles.

It was clear that Harry had the upper hand since he had never a leg away from his initial spot - Krum could not get into his personal space with his dexterity.

Krum was not too bad for a wizard - he had very fast reflexes. Harry felt his adrenaline was coursing through his body, adding to the excitement of the brawl.

There were feral smiles on their faces as they encircled each other like dogs and leapt at each other with renewed viciousness. Since they were familiar with Harry's hand-to-hand combat style, his friends could tell that Harry was deliberately prolonging the match with Krum. Harry was usually more aggressive and his blows, fast and accurate. During this match, his blows lacked their usual force.

When Krum started to slow down, Harry decided to end the match and turned offensive.

The shortened blow on his ribs stole Krum's breath and Krum took the next blow on his nose. It broke his cartilage and blood began to flow freely but it didn't stop him from lunging at Harry.

Apparently, International Quidditch Stars had to train their physical strength and stamina because he mustered enough energy to pump his fist onto Harry's lips, causing his lips to split and bleed.

They backed away, taking the time to clean themselves up with the back of their hands.

Krum was in a worse state than him, with a split lip, a broken nose and several large bruises blossoming on his face. However, it was nothing the school matron couldn't handle.

His breaths were uneven and heavy as he wavered on his feet and he could hardly see from his black eye but he was determined to fight a good fight.

His admiration for the Bulgarian increased and he decided to fulfil his desire. Harry's fist shot out one final time and cracked his face and Krum went down like a felled tree.

"Start the countdown," said Harry, watching Krum closely, wiping the beads of perspiration from his brow.

I need another bath soon, he thought, taking a whiff of himself.

Krum had lost his consciousness so Harry was declared a winner. Ignoring the cheering of most of the Hogwarts students, he nimbly leapt off the platform and headed towards the Gryffindor table.

"I'll speak to the relevant authorities for the use of violence against my students, make no mistake!" exclaimed Professor Karkaroff as some of Krum's classmates attended to him.

Professor McGonagall stood up. "If you recall, Mr. Krum was honouring a duel. Send him to the hospital wing, Madam Pomfrey will set him right."

They marched out of the Hall after levitating Krum.

His wife was waiting for him, with a ghost of a smile on her lips.

"I know you could put him down in a minute, what took you so long?" asked Hermione as they embraced. Hermione whipped out her wand and healed his lips immediately. She lifted his hands and checked his knuckles and found them to be skinned so she healed them.

"I took Sirius's advice." Harry replied, smiling. He pulled her close for a passionate kiss before they parted ways.

"I'll see you at Charms," Harry called out, jogging out of the Hall towards their quarters.

Since the reason why Harry had declared a duel on Krum was unknown, most of the crowd believed that the guys had fought over Hermione, giving her plenty of grief. She was met with cold stares from Krum's and Harry's fan clubs when she returned to her seat at the Gryffindor table. Surrounded by her close friends, no one dared to approach her.

"I think the duel just turned up the heat. If looks could kill..." Fred trailed off, looking around the Hall.

"It's not the first time they've resented me and it won't be the last. I'm fully capable of protecting myself," assured Hermione.

"Better be safe than sorry, don't wander off on your own." Susan warned. "You don't know what these girls are capable of. We like seeing you in one piece."

Susan, Hermione, and Neville headed to the venue of their first class of the day together where some of the fourth year Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs were already in the classroom waiting for Professor Flitwick.

"It's so romantic, Harry actually fought a duel for you," said Lavender dreamily, leaning forward so that she could speak to Hermione. It was clear that the Gryffindors were glad that Harry challenged Krum to a duel.

"Don't mind me saying, but Harry's just so hot!" Parvati exclaimed, fanning herself at the recollection of him on the duelling platform. Susan, who was sitting beside Neville, rolled her eyes.

Hermione gave them an indulgent smile, not really knowing how to answer her and she was glad when their attention fell on Neville.

"Can you fight without wand like Harry, Nev?" Lavender asked, admiring him boldly.

"Um, yeah, but not as well," replied Neville uncomfortably, flushing.

"I think there's something very attractive about a guy who can fight with his fists." Lavender whispered flirtatiously.

Neville's face turned into a deeper shade of red as he stammered.

He was saved by the man of the hour, Harry, who strode in and parked himself beside Hermione. She wound her arm around his neck possessively and they locked lips. Most of their classmates were whistling or cat-calling.

Harry was grinning from ear to ear when they shifted apart.

"That was some fist fight, Harry," praised Dean, grinning. "You did right showing him a thing or two. Won't you get into trouble for fighting with a star like him?"

"No." Harry answered, fishing out his textbook. "Viktor agreed to it."

The tiny professor strode in and started his lesson on Banishing Charm promptly. Professor Flitwick was particularly impressed by the non-magical way of duelling and sought Harry out to learn more about it after he gave the class the assignment to perform a proper Banishing Charm.

Harry, Hermione, and Neville were making their way to their Transfiguration class when Krum approached them. His lacerations were completely healed and he looked fine. He greeted them warmly.

Hermione's eyes narrowed in anger at the sight of him. Stepping forward, she decked him on the jaw. The impact of the blow caused him to stumble onto the floor.

"That's for hurting Harry," said Hermione angrily.

Krum grinned, looking very silly and cleaned the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. Harry lent a hand to help him up when he realised that Viktor was dizzy from the punch. "I expected no less that from you, Hermy-own-ninny." Krum said approvingly, staggering onto his feet. "I vant to haff a vord with you, Harry."

Harry stifled a smile. "Sure," he answered at a heartbeat. Turning to his wife and his best friend, "Nev and Mione, no need to wait for me," said Harry, "I'll see you in class." He followed the Bulgarian Star to an isolated corner of the corridor so that their privacy would be ensured.

To Neville's surprise, Hermione knitted her brows in a frown, "Guys," she muttered under her breath. "They get chummy after a good brawl."

Neville chuckled in amusement and steered her towards the Transfiguration classroom.

There was a look of determination in Krum's eyes when he looked at Harry.

"I would like to apologize. You're a better man than me." Krum began, hanging his head in shame. "I didn't think you might be in danger when you fell into the lake. If you're still not appeased, feel free to haff a free shot. It's what I deserve."

"There's no need for that. My honour has been reclaimed at the duel we had at breakfast," said Harry, smiling.

Krum appeared to be taken aback that Harry had just rejected an opportunity to hit him.

"You fight very vell. I admit my defeat," offered Krum.

Harry could tell that he was giving up pursuing for Hermione because of his defeat.

"Thank you," answered Harry, with a smile. "You fight quite well too."

He returned a rare smile and extended his hand in an earnest offer of friendship.

"Friends?" he asked.

Harry took his hand and sealed that friendship.

"Why don't you join us in our next Hogsmeade trip? I think its next week. I'm sure Susan and Hermione would love it if you came."

Viktor arched his eyebrows in surprise at the offer. "I'm not sure if Hermy-own-ninny would from the vay she hit me but it would be my honour to."

The two champions parted as friends.

Everyone was frantically preparing for their mid-term exams Christmas approached. Harry and his friends spent most of their free time in the Chamber where they could study in peace and comfort.

As promised, Viktor joined Harry and his friends for their next Hogsmeade trip, a week after their duel. Everyone was surprised that Krum was willing to spend time with them. Krum made it clear to Hermione that day that he wanted to remain her friend and she grudgingly agreed. They took him around the village and they found that he was quite fun to be around once he warmed up.

It was clear that he loved Quidditch and he was surprised that the two other champions played seeker for their respective House teams. Hermione sighed when they excitedly talked about the sport. They shared tips about flying, talked about the latest broomsticks on the market, and the different pro teams.

Even Fred warmed up to Viktor, after bonding over Butterbeer and Quidditch.

"If we have the chance, we must play together." Viktor suggested, smiling. He was quite apprehensive of being around with Harry's friends since he knew that most of them are scions of important families but he was surprised to find them easy and fun company. He had never enjoyed himself as much.

"We'll have to wait till the Tri-wizard Competition ends," returned Harry. "We could suggest a friendly game if you're still here."

"I believe we won't be leaving until a week after the end of the Tri-wizard Competition so we should play."

Everyone enjoyed themselves immensely at the outing.

Harry didn't give much thought to his second task until Cedric told him that he'd solved it. Even though Harry and Cedric were close friends, they stuck to the rules, choosing not to work out the clue together to play fair.

He soon realised that they were going to encounter Merpeople on the next task after analysing the clue again. The Bubblehead charm that lasted more than an hour would be useful for such a deep water expedition - however that was a spell that was supposed to be out of his limits, so he had to use an alternative. Transfiguration was out of the question since it would also be a high level one. There were bound to be alternatives that didn't need some flashy magic.

We've taken what you sorely missed, the clue read.

The task won't be easy at all, Harry thought with a sigh. It was going to be difficult to play fair since he would have to repress his instinct to rush to her side by shifting. He had to bide his time finding wasn't at all looking forward to the second task.

Their mid-terms ended in a flash and soon it was the end of the term. Everyone was looking forward to the Christmas and New Year break. As usual, Harry and his friends made preparations for their return to their homes during the holidays to celebrate Christmas. It would be their second celebration and Harry was looking forward to it. Since

they had spent their Christmas at the Potter Mansion the previous year, it was hastily decided that they would celebrate Christmas at the Bones Tower, the principal seat of the Bones Family.

Professor Hagrid and Krum were both invited to join them for the Christmas celebration.

In high spirits, the teenagers boarded the Hogwarts Express, the train that would bring them back to their families. Harry couldn't wait seeing everyone in person again.

A/N: Hi everyone, sorry for the late update. Thank you for all the reviews. I'm not sure if I replied all but I tried to. Fourth year is racing to an end, I estimate another five or six chapters and I'll probably be done with it. I hope you'll have a blessed week.

Chapter 35: Change In Holiday Plans

Beta-read by Frustr8dwriter

It was a blissful reunion at Platform Nine and three-quarters. Unlike the previous year, the Grangers and Mrs. Weasley were at the platform waiting for their children. Mrs. Weasley fussed over her two youngest children and they tolerated it quite well.

"What have you two been up to?" asked Mrs. Weasley in astonishment when she saw the twins up close. They looked very different – they were almost as sturdy as their elder brother Charlie. They easily lifted the four trunks and stacked them onto two trolleys before allowing themselves to be embraced by their mother.

"Show-offs," Ginny muttered with a teasing smile, in a voice loud enough for George to hear. "Too bad Angelina isn't here."

He turned to his sister and regarded her with a raised eyebrow.

"You can always carry your trunk by yourself," said George, folding his arms.

"I'll be a nice sister and give you more chances to flex your new muscles." Ginny replied with mock solemnity. Unable to keep up the façade, she burst out laughing.

"Mum, we've been horsing around with Harry of course." Fred explained, with amusement in his eyes, drawing away from Mrs. Weasley's embrace, turning to watch the other families.

The Grangers and the Potters were the closest to them and it was clear from the adults' expressions that they were very pleased to see the young couple. Jean drew Harry and Hermione into a tight hug, as Dan hovered near them protectively.

"It must've been very difficult term for both of you." Jean said sympathetically, finally letting go of them.

"It's been okay, mum. At least the competition will be over by February," assured Harry, smiling. "When the tournament ends, we can finally take a breather."

"Yes, we'll all be able to relax." Jean agreed. Harry knew that the adults had been worrying about him since his name appeared out of the Goblet of Fire. The Grangers were anxious to ask them several questions but the platform wasn't the right place for it. They knew the importance of secrecy so they couldn't say too much in public for fear of eavesdroppers.

"What's all this I've been hearing about Fleur Delacour and Viktor Krum?" Dan asked curiously, looking at the teenagers.

"Rumours," Harry replied, putting his arm around Hermione's waist after putting Hedwig's cage and Crookshanks' carrier on the trolley.

"Suitors," corrected Hermione indifferently, shrugging. "We're all friends now. In fact, you'll have the chance to meet Viktor sometime soon because Susan's invited him over."

Being ever observant, Jean lifted up Hermione's hand to observe the Celtic knot ring on her finger. "So this is what you got her. It's a beautiful and meaningful ring, Harry," commented Jean with a tender smile as she turned to look at him. "Your hearts, souls, and minds eternally intertwined in a never ending knot. It is a fitting ring for commitment."

Hermione liked the ring very much but she only had one complaint. "He gave it to me in front of the whole school," grumbled Hermione lightly, knitting her brows at the memory. "It was absolutely embarrassing."

Harry cocked a brow in surprise as he turned to gaze at his wife.

"Bollocks, I'm certain that you were touched by the gesture, not at all humiliated as you claim. It was mortifying on my part. Why, my knees were buckling beneath me as I was walking up to you," claimed Harry.

The frown cleared up as the corner of her lips quivered. "Then you did a brilliant job of appearing confident," replied Hermione.

The Grangers couldn't help chortling in amusement at their exchange of words.

"Nevertheless, for a boy who a year ago didn't know he had to take his love out for a date and didn't know how to go about planning said date, you've sure learned a lot," said Dan, his eyes gleaming with laughter.

Truth dawned upon Hermione.

"So you're the one who suggested he needed to take me out on our first date? I've been wondering who had kindly pointed Harry in the right direction. I know my husband quite well – he'd never have thought of planning a date on his own." Hermione exclaimed, grinning at Dan "Thanks, Dad!"

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that Harry was feigning an expression of hurt.

"Anything for you, sweetheart," Dan replied, returning a fatherly smile, watching his daughter nudge Harry in the ribs with her elbow.

"Harry's actions just reminded me that your father has never done anything remotely as romantic," commented Jean, eyeing Dan with narrowed eyes. Dan gave a nervous and mirthless laugh as he scratched the back of his head.

"Sorry Dad," Harry said, laughing out loud.

The Weasley family, led by Molly, approached to exchange pleasantries with them. Mrs. Weasley was unusually reserved with the Potters - she didn't know how to interact with them, after the incident last year. A humbled and uneasy Mrs. Weasley was one the Potters have never seen.

"Harry, I'm sor-"

He lifted up his hand to halt her from finishing the sentence.

"There's no need for another apology when we've already forgiven you," interrupted Harry firmly, speaking for Hermione and him, even though the matriarch of the Weasley family wasn't aware of it. The air of authority that surrounded him fitted him well. With a ghost of a smile on his lip, he continued. "Besides, you did provide me a sanctuary for me for one summer."

It didn't matter if Molly Weasley had some kind of motive behind the move, but the fact that she did momentarily relieve Harry of the terror of living with his relatives at a point when he was still at their mercy made Hermione somewhat obliged to her.

Her eyes grew misty, unable to believe that Harry would forgive her so easily. Ron, lingering behind Mrs. Weasley, was watching Hermione and Harry closely, with an inscrutable expression on his face.

"Thank you," said Mrs Weasley finally, clutching his hand. "Thank you."

"Mrs. Weasley, I'm sure you're well aware of the holiday arrangement we've offered to Fred and George," said Sirius, interrupting into the moment. Mrs. Weasley blinked continuously in surprise as the twins looked on in interest.

"Yes, Lord Black."

"We've decided we won't be celebrating Christmas in Bones Tower. We're heading to tropical climes for our Christmas and New Year holidays. Will you allow both Fred and George to join us?" asked Sirius. "You don't have to worry about their expenses because we'll cover them," offered Sirius. Sirius appreciated Fred and George's company since they were essentially birds of the same feather.

"I'll leave the boys to decide for themselves." Mrs. Weasley replied finally, surprising everyone. The Mrs. Weasley they knew would have made the decision on their behalf and declined his offer.

The twins exchanged astonished looks with each other, thinking over their options. It didn't take them too long to come to a decision.

"As much as we'd love to go, we'll give it a pass. Christmas is a time for families -" said George, looking at their mother. The large smile on her face told them that they'd made the right decision.

"- And you have as much right to spend time some time alone with your family, Harry. Besides, we miss pranking the berk," Fred continued with a cheeky grin. "I don't know how he got a job in the Ministry of Magic. I'm sure Dad wouldn't have pulled strings." They were, of course, referring to Percy.

"No, but your brother did do well on his NEWTs," defended Mrs Weasley, uncomfortable at the idea.

"And, he would've been too proud to accept a job if Dad really did pull some strings," continued George, shrugging.

"You'll hardly see him – he's been working very hard to prove his worth. As for your father putting in a good word for him – well, I think that Percy would've appreciated any help he could get if it were the only way he could work at the Ministry. After the huge scandal last year, it can be considered a miracle that he managed to land a job there and Percy is fully aware of that." Mrs. Weasley explained, with worry clouding her eyes.

Hermione raised her brow in surprise at the news while Sirius looked slightly uncomfortable at the disclosure.

Mr. Weasley was right – Percy had difficulty getting a post within the Ministry. No one wanted to employ him after he was seriously disgraced last year. They were all fearful of offending the Four Ancient Houses. Even though the Heads had forgiven the entire family, there were still many who would not place him in a prestige position unless they were out to challenge the authority of the Ancient Houses. That Fudge's government would actually employ someone who had a past conflict with the Head of the Ancient Houses suggested that Fudge was out to get the Ancient Houses by stirring quiet political undercurrents, she thought. It was a move, no doubt, to

save his own hide especially since he'd put one of the Heads of the Ancient Houses in Azkaban. Hermione wouldn't be too concerned about the government if Amelia, another one of the Heads, was working directly with him. Unfortunately, Aunt Amelia was frequently out of the office, which put her in a precarious position.

It would spell trouble in the future if they did not keep an eye on Fudge.

Hermione made a mental note to discuss the matter with the Heads when they had the time.

After chatting for a while, the Weasleys bade them goodbye, and left the platform.

Our holidays will be very different without the twins, commented Harry, watching them depart.

Well, they're happy, answered Hermione. After all the problems last year, they've gotten closer to the other members of their family. During difficult times, stronger ties are usually forged between family members.

"So it'll be just the four ancient families then?" Harry asked, turning to Sirius.

"Yes - Neville and Luna wanted to spend their time with their families. Hagrid didn't want to leave the castle for more than a day for some odd reason. Lupin can't make it because of his 'furry problem' so he'll be staying with Tonks and her family. With the twins going home, it'll be just us," replied Sirius, with a smile, putting his hands on Harry's shoulders. They were finally doing something as a family. "You're alright with the plan, Jean and Dan?" asked Sirius.

"Yes, but how are we getting there?" asked Jean. "I don't think that you'll be doing it the Muggle way, will you? Do you have passports?"

"We have a magical equivalent that will allow us to travel and we'll be heading there using portkeys. You don't have to worry about converting your currency. The credit card that Gringotts provided can

be used there and we won't need much at all," said Sirius. He handed them a key. "Activate this portkey at exactly three this afternoon and we'll meet you at the Arrival Hall of our destination."

"Hold your Hippogriffs, where exactly are we going, Sirius?" Hermione queried.

Sirius gave a Marauder-worthy smirk. "You'll find out when you get there."

At exactly three, the Potters and Grangers gathered at Potter Mansion with their luggage and activated the portkey. They landed gracefully on the ground, the sound of the footsteps muted by the lush carpeted ground. They found themselves in a large, brightly-lit and welcoming room. Captivated by the modern decorations of the Arrival Hall, they could tell that the country spared no expense in the decor. It was classily adorned with blooming purple and white orchids and pieces of art.

Oswald, like Sirius and Amelia, ditched his robes for business clothes. Susan, Daphne, Cedric, and Astoria were talking excitedly among themselves, quite impressed with the room they were in.

"Now that we're all here, we'll need to go through customs. By the way, we're not allowed to use wands here since their magical community frowns upon the use of wands." Sirius announced.

Cedric, Susan, Daphne, and Astoria cheerfully greeted Harry and Hermione, excited that they were travelling together.

"Anyway, I doubt you'll find yourself in need of protection," said Sirius. "Singapore is famous for her security, besides her cleanliness, and her love for fines."

Hermione's eyes widened in shock - they were actually in Singapore.

She remembered being curious about the smaller Asian countries on the Indian Ocean. These countries were once kingdoms rich with customs and culture before they were mercilessly plundered and destroyed for their natural resources. Their people were treated no

better than second class citizens. It was a great loss since those Kingdoms were great believers of Ancient Art of Magic. Most of their culture was lost when their colonial masters imposed their rule upon them, usually abolishing the monarchies that held the country together.

They were in the most successful example of a once-colonised country, since most of the neighbouring countries were still fighting to come with terms with themselves. They were successful in coming up with a political system that would be more suited to them than the structures left by their colonial masters.

She was interested in the small magical community residing among the non-magicals. The social tapestry of the migrant country was so rich, the practices of magic so varied, that it was impossible to pinpoint the kind of magic the magicals in the country practiced. There was the idea of Yin or Yang of the Chinese, and that magic generally stemmed from the four natural elements, while the indigenous people generally believed that magic lies in the gift of calling and using the spirits in Nature like tree spirits. There were other schools of thoughts regarding magic and the thing that surprised her was that all of them managed to find a common ground between all of the strains of thought, despite the disparity, thus the ability to coexist. It was their keen knowledge of the Ancient Magic that Hermione would love to know. Hermione believed it would be an enriching experience to learn the ways of the concealed community.

"So it was alright that you spend your holidays with us?" asked Harry, looking at Cedric.

"Yes, they were good about it. Well, they understand that I have the right to decide how I want to spend my holiday," replied Cedric. "Besides, we'll only be spending a week here. We'll be returning home on the 26th of December."

The wizards and witches hastily stowed their wands and went through the stringent checks. They were warmly welcomed before they departed the Hall. They were impressed by the sleek lines and general beauty of the airport. They split themselves into three groups, got into three separate taxis, and headed straight to their hotel. They

welcomed the temporary relief from the sweltering heat. It was sunny and bright outside, unlike Britain.

Lush bushes of bright red flowers continued to line the straight road they were on. The road was unusually well-maintained. When the Control tower, a large tower that looked as if a large spaceship was resting on it, had faded away from sight, they began to see more of the city. Large tall concrete buildings dotted the landscape, large trees and plants were planted along the roadways.

They were soon brought to the heart of the country, where malls huddled next to each other and large crowds of finely dressed people paced the wide streets. There, the traffic grew thick and it was a riot of noise as they stared at the Christmas street decorations. The street lamps were fashioned to look like mouth-watering candy canes. Large, silvery-blue plastic snowflakes hung from the towering trees that stood along the road. According to the driver, the area they were driving through was known as Orchard Road. It would continue to be richly decorated for the season. The malls didn't seem to pull any stops in their holiday décor - with magnificent statues of Santa Claus in his sleigh - full of gifts or being pulled by reindeers.

"It's a pity that it's still daytime," said the driver. "It's really pretty when the lights are up. Orchard Road is really a good place to shop especially with all the Christmas sales."

"I can tell from the number of malls." Jean commented, peering out of the window at the streets. "I'm just curious, what would you advise a tourist to do, other than shop?"

He smiled. "Well, the Mandai Zoo is a nice place to go to, just remember to go early so that you'll have the chance to look at all the exhibits. Well, if you prefer to visit at night, then you can experience the Night Safari. Tourists typically head to Little India, Chinatown, Geylang Serai, and Arab Street to get a taste of Singapore's multi-ethnic society. There are lots to see, try, and eat. If you like to eat, then Singapore is the place for you. You can find good food at cheap prices all around the island if you know where to look. I'm sure the hotel would be most helpful in directing you."

"So are there any dishes that you'd recommend?" Harry inquired.

He frowned slightly in thought as if he was asked a particularly difficult question. "I would guess Chilli Crabs, Chicken rice, Laksa, Roti Prata, and Satay."

"What is this Roti Prata or Satay?" asked Hermione curiously, leaning slightly forward.

The taxi driver chuckled at the way she pronounced it.

"Roti Prata is an Indian Pancake and the more creative stalls sell them with many different fillings like banana, onion, or cheese and you eat them with curry. Satay is barbequed meat on skewers served with peanut sauce."

"Are they difficult to find?" asked Dan, turning to the driver.

"Not at all, you can find them easily at any hawker centres. You need to ask around for the really delicious ones."

Harry noticed that the places of worship belonging to different ethnic groups were built beside one another- an Indian temple was set next to a large Chinese temple and the Chinese and Indians were seen intermingling and entering both sacred places.

The sight gave him hope.

It wasn't an impossible dream, Harry mused, thinking about the discrimination back at home. The four Ancient Families were already planting the seeds, intermingling, and entering both Magical and Non-Magical Britain.

Hermione turned away from the window to look at him. Placing her hand over his, she assured, "The day will come." It had to, lest another Riddle would rise up. After all, Riddle was a product of the class prejudice rampant in the Magical society so really they had to find a solution to nip the problem in the bud.

The landscape of the buildings began to change - instead of the tall modern buildings, the streets were now filled with shorter and older buildings which were very common around Singapore in the old days. They were told that these two stories buildings were called shophouses. The shop keepers and their families would live in the apartment above the shop in the past.

Their hotel was situated in the Civic District, where there were many reminders of British rule. Singapore, along with Malaysia, Burma, and India used to be part of the British colonies. They spotted several old colonial houses as rode on to the hotel. They soon approached a large, white, nineteenth century Neo-classical Bungalow fondly known as the "Grand Old Lady". A doorman, dressed impeccably in a crisp uniform, politely opened their door when the taxi finally came to a halt at the grand entrance. He helpfully took their luggage out of the boot and carried them into the large three-story bungalow.

They walked through the trademark white arches into the large and airy lobby. The furniture that adorned the ground floor keenly reflected the diversified culture of Singapore, with its oriental rugs, large imposing teak coffee tables and side tables with intricate carvings, and beautiful and regal Peranakan-styled furniture.

Oswald, Amelia, Sirius, and the rest of their company were already waiting patiently, chatting as they sat at the plush armchairs and lounges. They were clearly impressed with the service and the hotel.

"Welcome to Raffles Hotel," greeted the staff politely when they spotted the Grangers and the Potters. They were led to the counter for registration where they also met their butler. They were taking three Grand Hotel Suites since they boasted of two bedrooms, a private balcony, and a pantry. The three suites were large enough to house all of them comfortably.

"I bet the twins will regret not coming with us. I was told that Singapore is practically a food paradise," said Harry, smiling when he met up with his friends. They were taking in the structure of the building, admiring how well-maintained the hotel was.

"The hotel was built in 1887 hence its distinctive nineteenth century design. It was refurbished in 1991 to enhance its look. If you're interested in learning more, you could always pop by the Raffles Museum where you can find out about the history of the hotel," explained one of the staff when they noticed the group's keen interest in the architecture of the hotel.

"Is this one of the oldest hotels in Singapore?" Harry asked curiously.

"Yes," answered the staff politely. "It's known as one of the national monuments because of its long history."

"Thank you," said Harry, impressed by their knowledge.

The hotel porters took their luggage to their respective suites so that they could freshen up and change into lighter clothing. They were all eager to go out and experience the city.

Their air-conditioned suites left them completely astounded since they spoke of comfort and luxury with rich Oriental carpets on the teak floors, elegant-themed furniture, and brilliant art pieces that depicted scenes from old Singapore, as well as china that reflected the unique heritage of the country. As soon as the porters delivered their belonging to their respective rooms, they began to change into suitable clothes, noticing that Singaporeans dressed very casually.

Oswald had all the arrangements down pat and they made their first stop at a small coffee shop located on a small lane nearby. They could see many shops and restaurants on both sides of the small road, facing each other.

"Apparently, they sell really good duck rice here," said Oswald, leading his party to sit at a large round table near the stalls. Several braised duck, chunks of fried pork belly and meat were displayed by the small stall which sold duck rice. A mouth-watering scent drifted from that stall and they decided to order a duck and a large portion of fried pork belly. Plates of brown rice, cooked with yam were served, together with those dishes. The bones of the duck had been removed, cut into smaller pieces, drenched with brown gravy and garnished with sliced Japanese cucumbers.

They were surprised at how delicious it was despite the fact that the dishes were relatively simple fare. After a very satisfying meal, they set off for the Mandai Zoological Garden, one of the hottest tourist attractions and spent the rest of the day there. It was not difficult to tell why it had appealed to the masses with the 'open zoo' concept as walking through the gardens took them to various places in the world: the African savannah - a grassland in which the lion reigns king, the high ridges of the Himalayans which the mountain goats climb easily, the tropical rainforest where a diversity of animals live, and the air-conditioned enclosures imitating the colder climates for the animals of the Arctic Circle.

The barriers that separated the visitors from the animals were almost invisible - wet moats or vegetation lay below their eye level. They could get up close to animals that posed no danger - like the golden lion monkey. Its flaming orange fur and the brilliant 'mane' around its neck gave the monkey its name. It perched on a tree near them, watching them with great interest, as if the humans were the exhibits not the other way around.

They saw the highlight of the zoo, Ah Meng, the Matriarch of the family of Orangutans swinging in their enclosure.

The adults laughed when they watched the other teenagers anxiously pressing their faces up the glass fronted enclosures of polar bears after they moved away from the Primate Land.

Peacocks with their colourful feathers in full blossom, strutted freely around the garden, adding to the charms of the garden.

With the reservoir and the forest as its backdrop, the zoo was a picture of tranquillity.

They caught some of the feeding shows and had an opportunity to ride on the elephant. The elephant would lower its body to the ground at the command of its keeper then steady itself when the visitors were on its back. It was a short ride around the fence, but it was an experience so novel that Harry didn't think he would ever forget it.

They saw some people taking photographs with a large local python. There was a photographer on hand to take the picture for a fee, and all proceeds were promised to go to the maintenance of the zoo. They were watching a family cautiously carrying the large python from a distance. The snake looked so bored that Harry laughed.

Hermione arched a quizzing brow.

Harry leaned in so that he was whispering into Hermione's ear. "The snake is feeling very bored from keeping so still."

There was an impish grin on his face suddenly and he addressed the rest of his family.

"I think to commemorate our time here, why don't the Slytherins take a shot with the symbol of their house? It's not everyday where you can carry a snake." suggested Harry gesturing to the python. "After all, we all can't squeeze into a photograph."

Oswald eyed him suspiciously.

"No, thank you," answered Daphne flatly.

"It looks fun! Let's do it. Let me see. Daph, Dad, Mom, and I are Slytherins. Are there any other Slytherins in the group?" Astoria searched the faces of the group and found no more.

"You ought to include Cedric since it looks like a Greengrass family portrait," said Susan, nudging Daphne.

Daphne promptly ignored her but Cedric blushed red.

"Let me talk to the person in charge," said Harry, hurrying off to speak to the keeper of the python. Hermione spotted him bending his head slightly so that he could speak to the snake. The snake tipped his head as if listening to him and nodded its head occasionally.

What are you up to now, Harry?

Harry gave them a thumbs-up and gestured them to join him.

Felicia and Oswald exchanged a look with each other. However, seeing that their youngest daughter was so excited, they did as told.

"I'm not a Slytherin!" Cedric protested when Susan shoved him towards the seats where the keeper stood ready with the python. Astoria took it upon herself to grab him by his wrist and dragged Cedric to accompany them.

All five of them managed to squeeze into the seats provided and the keeper gently handed the python to them. The python seemed to have a mind of its own, slithering across the shoulder of Oswald as the others supported the heavy snake.

Oswald appeared to be uncomfortable with the snake getting so close to his face but he straighten himself, looking as dignified as ever.

The keeper looked mildly surprised that it had moved.

"All of you look set for a shot," said the photographer with a smile. "On my signal, three, two, one..."

The jaws of the audience nearly touched the ground when they saw the python in a striking position and enlarging his jaws so that it looked as if it was going to swallow Oswald's head whole after giving his shoulder a little squeeze. The result was quite comical - Oswald's eyes nearly budged out, his jaws hanging open as he jumped slightly from the constriction.

Once the shot was taken, the snake became its usual mild self. Hermione could swear she saw the snake give Harry a wink.

Harry, Sirius, and Dan howled in laughter at the sight.

Harry had to applaud the python's timing - the camera captured that surprising moment precisely.

"How did he do that?" asked Dan after he recollected himself.

"Harry can speak to snakes." Hermione replied, glaring at Harry.

"That was a good one, pup!" said Sirius, wiping the tear off his cheeks. He laughed so hard he was in tears.

Oswald was shooting daggers at Harry with his eyes after he saw the photograph. "You couldn't resist, could you Harry?" The other Greengrasses were laughing at the sight of their father.

"No, the snake and I were bored. It's not exactly my fault. He had a choice between Cedric and you and apparently, he felt that you were the better deal," said Harry indifferently.

When they walked to the House of snakes, they egged Harry to use his ability to charm a large handsome black King Cobra to dance like Indian Snake Charmers.

The dignified snake stood erected, his hood expanded, watching Harry closely. No, even though I'm called a King Cobra, I'm hardly one. It motioned to the sign on the enclosure.

"The King Cobra, despite its name, isn't a cobra at all. It does not have the mark of a cobra, double eyes or single eye stripe pattern on its neck, instead it has inverted 'V' like marks."

"The other cobras are asleep," said Harry, gesturing to the other enclosures.

I can see that, answered the King Cobra sarcastically. Contrary to popular belief, my eyesight's quite good. And I'm not one who would entertain others like a circus animal.

Harry rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "So what's the price?"

You want me to dance? You'll have dance along too.

Hermione was stifling her laughter with a hand covering her mouth as she watched their interaction.

"It's time to let down your hair, isn't it?" said Harry, letting out a sigh. "Go easy on me. Hit it, pal."

The reversal of roles was extremely entertaining, the King Python was the charmer while Harry was its snake, imitating its actions, and his family began laughing loudly.

The heat of the day soon dissipated as night began to fall upon them but the city remained unusually bright with all its street headed over to Orchard Road in the evening for some shopping and dinner. The street was indeed beautiful when it was lit up and it enhanced the festive spirit. They began their Christmas shopping straight after a lavish dinner at a Japanese Steak House.

The large Christmas tree they had at the shopping mall rivalled their own in Britain. It was about five stories high, beautifully decorated with a large glowing star sitting on the top of the tree. There was a faint pine scent in the building.

"Are you sure that's not done by magic?" asked Amelia, admiring it from the second level. "How do they put all those lights on the tree?"

"I can't really answer that. We already have difficult decorating one smaller than this with magic," said Hermione.

They strolled through the shopping mall, picking up presents along the way.

When they had finally returned to the hotel room, it was very late. Harry and Hermione put their shopping bags aside and crashed.

They woke up in the morning to a traditional breakfast consisting of two half-boiled eggs, toasted bread with kaya (a coconut egg jam) and butter, and shredded Chicken congee. They lounged around at the beautiful palm garden of Raffle Hotel for a few hours before they started on their next part of the journey.

They decided to explore Chinatown, the ethnic quarter of the Chinese. They were advised to check out the smaller lanes where most of the treasures lay. There, they could find good food and interesting trinkets if they were willing to hunt for it. True enough, they came

across many interesting shops selling a variety of things, ranging from Chinese calligraphy to furniture.

Harry, much to Hermione's chagrin, wanted to buy a large granite bench. Harry had to have the interesting bench since it looked as if two granite monkeys were supporting it. He also admired the fine handiwork. He couldn't imagine carving something like that without magic.

"It's a good buy. A lot of people have been interested in it but they didn't buy it because they don't have the space," said the shopkeeper excitedly.

"No, we can't bring that back." Hermione warned fiercely, tugging Harry's arm. "We can't exactly transport it."

Harry had to admit that his wife was right and he turned down the tempting offer.

"The Chinese must revere Dragons a lot," commented Harry when he saw grand portraits of dragons hung at a stall. The pictures the Chinese artists drew were different from the dragons they were familiar with. The Chinese dragon had horns like a deer; eagle-like claws, a long scaly body like a serpent, and it looked grand. They saw them on engraved on the roofs of buildings and were told that dragons were symbols of protection. There were other Chinese paintings of plants like bamboo, orchids and chrysanthemums. They learned that Chinese scholars of the past loved to draw these three items since they were supposed to represent good character traits. To illustrate, bamboo is usually associated with perseverance and the orchid symbolized grace.

Walking into the brightly-lit shop, they saw an aged artist, sitting at a large desk, drawing. He was using a large calligraphy paint brush to complete a picture of two horses on boundless grassland.

The horses were made alive at the hand of the artist, they looked as if they were really prancing and playfully challenging each other, as they galloping across the field. Their long manes whipped wildly from the winds as the horse turned to and regarded each other. They

could sense the freedom and even the camaraderie these horses felt in the vivid way they were portrayed.

The two horses were racing together towards an unknown, enjoying each other's company, and living in the moment.

It was the same freedom they were now experiencing. Here, he was just another face in the crowd, not Lord Gryffindor, the Head of an Ancient and Noble family. He had the freedom to go out with Hermione in public, hold her hand, and light-heartedly sneak kisses with her behind Dan's back. Even Daphne and Cedric were quite surprised at how affectionate they were.

It was a liberty much denied to them back in Britain. The aged artist was putting the final touches to the landscape, writing a line of Chinese characters with a firm hand before stamping his name at the bottom of the piece.

"Sir," Harry interrupted. "How much do you want for this piece?"

The wizened man looked surprised. "I can't sell it now. It will take some time for it to dry," answered the old artist, gesturing to the line of wet Chinese characters.

"How long do you think it will take?" Harry questioned politely.

"It'll take a while," replied the old man with a wisp of foreign accent. "I have other paintings of horses, though." The old man stood up and gestured to the other paintings with his gnarled hands. They were beautiful but they did not seem to captivate him as much as the one the artist had just finished.

"I can see that your mind is set," said the old man, watching him closely. "If you're determined to have it, you can come back in a few hours. It'll be ready by then."

The sweltering heat of the topics had them perspiring from all the walking as they wandered around Chinatown. They stopped at a famous Hawker Centre for lunch, which was a place where many food stalls are congregated. They tried many locality specials before

proceeding to walk around the stopped at a small dessert shop and tried some of the local desserts like Gui ling gao, a cold herbal dessert with syrup, and Mango Sago when they felt thirsty. The teenagers had found many unique trinkets in the small stalls that lined the road and decided to buy some of them for Luna.

They soon wandered away from the tourist areas onto a quiet lane. Bicycles stood along the lane, on the dull grey cement grounds. Steel gates were bolted shut and they could hear the echoes of the hustle and bustle from the other busy streets. It was as if this lane was a world of its own, far away from the other parts of Chinatown.

A line of old shophouses huddled together in that lane. Most of them were closed with an exception of a particularly old shop that stood at the end of the row.

"Do you think we should turn back?" asked Susan, looking around. "There isn't anyone on this street."

Harry spotted a dirty yellow banner with a picture of palm hanging on the gates of the only shophouse that seemed to be open for business.

"Let's have a look around," said Hermione, curious about the lone shop.

The old shop turned out to be offering palmistry services and it looked very old. Traditional green ceramic tiles filled its ground. Most of the sunlight was blocked out by the five-foot veranda so it was very dark.

There was a large wooden table in the centre of the room, and wooden stools surrounding it.

Harry and Hermione could sense faint traces of magical energy in the place. Two wooden-flap doors stood separated the place for business from the private quarters. The wooden-flap doors were pushed open suddenly, revealing an old Chinese man.

The aged man was bald and had a long silver beard. He was dressed in a traditional black shenyi. He smiled at them cordially. Harry could

feel the aura of restrained magic resonating around him. "Welcome. Do you want your palm to be ...?"

His smile disappeared from his face when he spotted Harry.

"You bring a dark spirit into this place, young one," said the old man gravely, hold his gaze.

With a flick of his wrist, the metal gates crashed down, shutting them inside. None of his companions noticed it since his declaration left them wheeling in shock.

"You really don't need those," continued the old man calmly. With another wave of his hand, his shrunken sword and Hermione's wooden pistol flew onto his outstretched hand. Harry blinked continuously, surprised that his Gryffindor Sword and Hermione's pistol were summoned away from their anti-summoning holsters.

The teenagers brandished their wands immediately, with a spell on their lips as they eyed the old man carefully.

"I don't like being near weapons. Put those away, we've much to talk about, Harry and Hermione," instructed the old man calmly, even though five wands were pointing in his direction.

Harry lowered his wand slightly. "How do you know our names?" asked Harry guardedly.

"I sense a unique bond between you and her, so I hazarded a guess. I've been waiting anxiously to meet either of you. I didn't expect the abomination."

A sparkle of interest lit Hermione's eyes.

"An abomination?" Harry echoed, raising his brows in surprise.

The elderly nodded solemnly. "A deviant from the natural. An evil spirit. A parasite. It feeds on your life force. I believe we can talk more inside. Come with me," said the old man, turning around.

Hermione promptly lowered her wand, seeing that the old man meant no harm and the other teenagers follow suit after coming to the same conclusion.

"Wait, how do we know that you won't harm us?" Amelia asked, eyeing him cautiously.

He grew slightly impatient. "How would I know you won't hurt me?" The old man returned, meeting her gaze. "I'm severely outnumbered and you're still armed with your wands. "

They had no arguments against that so they followed him into his private quarters. However, the adults did not lower their guard.

There, they saw diagrams of the Chinese five elements and Yin-Yang. He gestured all of them to take a seat at the round wooden table and politely offered them some Chinese tea. Not even for a second, did his eyes leave Harry.

"I'm Cheng Tze." The Chinese wizard said finally. "May I?"

Before they could register his request, he grabbed Harry's right hand and Hermione's left hand. A tiny furrow appeared between his eyebrows as he scrutinised their palms.

The adults immediately pointed their wand at him but lowered it when they realised that he was reading their palms.

Everyone seemed to be holding their breath, waiting for him to speak.

"Yes, a heavenly match." Cheng Tze proclaimed with a smile, lifting his head to look at them. "Both of you are joined in the heart, spirit and mind. It's exceedingly rare and a heavenly match usually appears when a catastrophe is befalling us. You're the pair that I was supposed to meet in this lifetime."

His smile faded away and the furrow on his face grew deeper. "It's strange that your union can't expel this parasite out of your body," continued the aged man, looking at the couple. "I would've expected the power of your joining to be forceful enough to get rid of it."

"What is this it?" Hermione asked, her brows furrowing into a frown.

He blinked continuously in surprise. "I'm referring to a piece of spirit unnaturally linked to Harry's spirit."

Hermione lifted her brow in surprise and her breath hitched. "Do you mean that there is another soul connected to his soul, other than my soul?" demanded Hermione.

"A small piece of soul crudely joined to his," replied Cheng Tze, contemplatively, stroking his long silvery beard. "I wonder," he mused. Suddenly, he trained his eyes on Harry again. "Was there a premeditated attempt on your life, young man?"

"Why would you ask such a thing?" questioned Amelia, finally speaking. "What makes you so sure that he has a piece of soul connected to his?"

"There is an imbalance in the energies because of how unnatural this piece has attached itself to the young man's soul and the presence of the evil soul are stirring up a lot of yin vibes around here," answered the old man coolly, looking at Amelia. "I mean no offence but it is something, I won't expect people like you to pick up since you're not taught to be in tune with the energies," continued the old man, sipping his Chinese tea.

"Chinese believed that magic are energies that stem from the five classical elements and yin and yang." Hermione explained, seeing their blank expressions.

"Not a specific attempt on his life, but someone wanted his whole family dead," said Oswald, frowning in thought.

"Yes, there was an attempt," answered Harry in a quiet voice, looking up so that he could meet the piercing gaze of the old man. The room fell still immediately. "It happened when I was just one year old. One of the darkest wizards of all times entered my house, with the sole intention of taking my life." Harry could hear the gasp of shock at the revelation. Most of the wizards believed that Lord Voldemort entered

the Potter residence in Godric's Hallow, with the purpose of wiping out his opponents, namely Harry's parents. He clenched his fist and continued in a firm voice, "He didn't expect that my mum would use her body to shield me when he tried to kill me after killing my dad and when he turned his wand on me again, the spell rebounded on him and he sort of died."

He was conscious of the way Hermione held his hand to lend him support.

While the other Heads of the Houses were wheeling from that shock, the old man stood up suddenly. He stared at Harry with a wide-eyed expression.

"He sort of died?" questioned Cheng Tze sharply.

Harry was slightly taken aback by his tone but he answered him. "Most of them believe that he died, but I've met him recently and he was just reduced to a spirit."

"A spirit you said? What about the body?" continued Cheng Tze.

"Destroyed by the killing curse," said Harry.

The old Chinese man frowned. Sensing the confusion of the other occupants in the room, he began to explain.

"The Chinese has always been fascinated with immortality. In the past, Emperors would commission sorcerers to discover a way to prolong life so the sorcerers began to research souls, the essence of us. A group of them made headway into the idea of mortality. They believed that we die because our physical body can no longer house our souls. There was some talk about transferring a part of the soul into another vessel so that even if our physical bodies were destroyed, we would not die. The records of those works were believed to be completely destroyed. The sorcerers understood the danger of leaving such works behind - they would create an immortal monster on the throne." The old man explained as he paced around the room.

"Do you mean that Lord Voldemort, the man who tried to kill him, transferred a piece of his soul to Harry?" demanded Amelia, stunned.

Cheng Tze turned to look at her again. Stroking his beard, he answered, "It would appear to be the case."

"So we have an immortal and powerful monster on our hands?" asked Cedric incredulously.

"If that myth was true, then he could die if all his soul is destroyed." Sirius interjected.

"Now, if a part of his soul is joined to Harry's, wouldn't there be a mental and emotional link?" Hermione inquired sharply.

The old man stopped in his pacing to fix his attention on Hermione. A ghost of a smile appeared on his lips at her astuteness. "You're wise, Hermione. Yes, an unsound and weak link will exist between him and Harry. However, the connection would be very weak since he has no physical body."

The dream that Harry had during the summer holiday was more likely a result of the unstable link between them, thought Hermione. The images were vivid-as if she was looking out of her own eyes.

"Could he have passed some of his power to me when he left a piece of his soul in me?" asked Harry, remembering the conversation he had with Dumbledore on his second year.

For a moment, Cheng Tze looked impatient, as if Harry was asking an obvious question. "Yes, your spirit holds the ability for you to do magic." Harry just needed a confirmation; he had come to that conclusion when he realised his magical powers had increased as soon as their soul bond was completed.

"It won't harm you. In fact, I would think it's a good thing because you'll be able to hear his thoughts. After all, the Chinese has always believed that to win a war, you need to know the enemy as well as knowing yourself." answered Cheng Tze, giving a smile that showed his teeth.

"There are other ways to gather intelligence and we need to get rid of the soul if we want to destroy him. Would it be dangerous if we attempt to remove that piece of soul?" questioned Hermione.

"I don't know of any rituals to do so, but I know it'll be too risky. I believe that the errant soul is so imbued into Harry's soul that it's now a part of his, as much as both of your souls are a part of each other. Both of your souls might be destroyed if we attempt to separate it."

"So we can't get rid of him without killing ourselves," summarised Harry in a deadpanned voice. Yet, we've to get rid of him.

"I would say yes, if the soul is too connected to yours," replied the old man, stroking his beard. "We believe that the once the soul is connected to something, it is almost impossible to break that connection."

"Look, don't you need to break the connection to the physical body so that you can put a piece of soul in another person?" ventured Hermione thoughtfully.

"No, the connection is not broken when the soul splits, in fact, it will destroy a part of the body," said the old man. That statement seemed to have some truth since Lord Voldemort did not look remotely human when he came for him that night, thought Harry.

The rest of the room grew silent at his answer.

"So Lord Voldemort does not know that Harry has a piece of soul in him?" asked Jean.

Hermione grew thoughtful at her mother's words. "Riddle isn't stupid - he won't put a piece of his soul into another body since it might be easily destroyed. Yes, I don't think he even knows of the connection Harry has to him," said Hermione.

"If we could use the link without alerting him, we could gather a lot of intelligence," said Oswald, stroking his chin contemplatively.

"I don't know how to. I'm not even aware of the presence of the link between him and me until Cheng Tze pointed it out" Harry replied. "Though, I would love to find out the faithful servant hiding in Hogwarts."

"Ah, you two have interesting rings." The old man said suddenly, staring at their left hands. "May I?" He asked before waving his hand over their left hands so that the simple gold bands suddenly appeared on their fourth fingers.

"How did you do that?" demanded Hermione, absolutely certain that what the old man would do will not cease to surprise her. Everyone was equally shocked to see golden rings on their fourth fingers. Jean and Dan had only seen them once - on the day of the wedding when Harry and Hermione exchanged rings. They didn't think they'd worn it this whole time.

"I wield the element of metal," said Cheng Tze. "With enough practice, your element can respond to your wishes like an eager puppy. There is no need for such crude devices to create a bond between your element and you." With another wave of his hand, the rings slipped off their fingers and fell onto the table with soft 'cling'.

Their eyes widened with surprise - Edmund had told them it was charmed never to leave their fingers.

"I believe you were asking me how I removed the charms. I didn't - the charms in the ring are irremovable so I added charms to overcome them temporary," explained Chen Tze. "Let's move on to some basic practices. Harry, why don't you give it a try?" offered the old man patiently. "Try to reach out and connect to the candle flame. When you finally feel it, concentrate what you want it to do and believe that it will."

Harry and Hermione exchanged unsure looks with each other. Finally, he climbed onto his feet. Harry walked over to the lighted candle. With an intense frown of concentration on his face, he waved one of his hands over the naked flames. He gingerly tried to reach for the flame and could feel the heat coming from the small flame.

He was perplexed.

What was he exactly suppose to feel?

He cleared his mind of his doubts and uncertainty and tried again. He could feel the warmth of the small flame, as it danced about on the wick. He detected a power that seemed to be resonating from the small harmless flame - an energy that could destroy or save, depending on the will of the user. He felt a sort of enthusiasm from that ball of energy, an eagerness that of a willing worker, waiting to be put to work.

"Try changing its colour, Harry," said Cheng Tze, watching him with interest.

The smoky orange-red flame flickered on the wick a little before flaring in a brilliant green, leaving the rest of the family dumbstruck. An excited smile appeared on his face. It soon transformed into a myriad of colours, at the hand of Harry. Harry finally settled on a blue in the same shade of Hermione's trademark portable waterproof flames.

It was unusually effortless.

Cheng Tze smiled.

"Try sustaining the flame in your hand, Harry," encouraged Cheng Tze.

Harry nodded. He did not falter for a second as he scooped the flame into his palm easily. The blue flame floated and wavered slightly above his palm. Harry teasingly swiped his friends with the flame and they ducked nimbly.

"We'll get you for that, Harry!" said Susan, her eyes gleaming with amusement, dodging away from the flame.

Harry began to play with the flame - tossing it to and from between his two hands like it was a ball.

"It's enough, Harry," said Cheng Tze. "Your bond is still weak, so you can't sustain it for long."

At that command, the flame on his palm was put off immediately.

"You can take the attributes of a flame too, like producing a lot of heat or providing light," said Cheng Tze, illustrating by hardening his fist so that they would be as hard as steel and punching the wall. The wall crumbled from the impact immediately and he repaired it with a wave of his hand. "Conjure your element," said Cheng Tze, conjuring a thick metal shield from thin air. "Hermione, it's now your turn. Try it. Water is all around you, feel its presence."

"I'll take much long since I'm not as intuitive as Harry," said Hermione, closing her eyes.

There was a frown on her face for a while.

When she finally opened her eyes a few moments later, she was surprised to see a ball of water gathered in her hand. Effortlessly, she shaped the ball of water into a variety of shapes.

She playfully tossed it at Daphne, who ducked and summoned it back with her will, so that it would hit Susan at the back of her head.

There was a squeal when she was wet and the rest of the family dissolved in laughter. Harry good-naturedly dried her, using a drying spell.

The hilarity died after a while.

"What is your purpose in teaching us?" asked Hermione, eying Cheng Tze suspiciously.

He arched one of his white brows in surprise. "I see it as my duty to correct you. It is clear that you are practising ancient magic, no matter how unsophisticated your methods are. Elemental magic, unlike other magic, works better when your bond with the elements is strengthened. You should be working in harmony with or be one with the element. Otherwise, you will require a lot of your magic to force

the element into your control, even with your ring which amplifies your control over the element."

"How do you strengthen this link?" asked Harry.

"By getting to know the element better. You can do practices like the exercise you've done just now."

"Can any of us establish this bond with an element?" Amelia questioned curiously.

"I'm afraid not. Their soul bond makes them more receptive to form connection with animal spirits or any one of the five elements, skipping at least thirty years of hard work to develop that sort of awareness." Harry and Hermione slipped on their wedding rings as they spoke at length about the properties of elemental magic.

"If you don't mind, could you please remove the charms you placed on our rings and return our weapons back to us," said Harry.

Cheng Tze did as he requested. They could understand why he didn't like to be in the presence of weapons since he was very in tune with the metal element.

Hermione and Harry transformed their weapons into their original form before changing it back and storing them.

"Cool pistol, Hermione," commented Sirius, grinning.

"We'll speak about it when we return to the hotel tonight," said Amelia sternly, eyeing Harry and Hermione. Cheng Tze stepped between them so that he could speak to Harry.

"Your lesson with me is done, Harry and Hermione. I'm sorry I can't do much about the abomination in you, Harry. However, I have a good friend who would like to meet you. His beliefs are slightly different from mine and he might be able to shed more light," answered Cheng Tze.

"Another Chinese wizard?" questioned Harry.

He smiled as he shook his head. "No, a Javanese Shaman by the name of Tun. I believe it will be an enlightening meeting."

"I've heard that they are well adept in using the spirits to perform magic to harm others." Hermione quipped. "Is that true?"

Cheng Tze gave an indulgent smile. "Magic is like a sword - it can be used to harm or protect, depending on the will of the user. The shaman believes that magic is a gift to communicate and link to the different spirits. Tun firmly believes that magic is a gift he should use to bless others."

"I wouldn't mind meeting him," said Harry. "I would rather only have a soul in my body."

"Wait here, he will be here promptly." answered Cheng Tze, walking into one of the rooms, no doubt to call on his friend.

"You've been keeping a lot of secrets, Pup. I had no idea that you could use elemental magic." Sirius said.

"We discovered that we had a bond to an element when our soul bond was finalised." Harry explained indifferently. "Whatever you learn here, must stay within these walls until further notice."

"Merlin's Beard, it's a lot of information to digest." Sirius admitted, drawing his hand through his hair tiredly. "It doesn't help knowing that Riddle is practically invincible until all his soul is destroyed."

"No, it doesn't help knowing that Harry has a piece of that soul in him," added Jean.

"No, it doesn't. We're not backing out, no matter how tough it is. He is still attempting to kill Harry and he has successfully killed most of our loved ones. We can't let him continue." Oswald declared.

The other adults nodded in agreement.

"There's got to be a way out," said Harry contemplatively. For his and her sake. "We'll just need to find out what it is."

Cheng Tze returned with another man with darker complexion. He didn't look anything extraordinary, in fact Harry wouldn't even notice him in a crowd, yet Harry could feel that there was something different about him. His piercing black eyes swept across them and settled on Sirius. "I'm Tun. You're linked to a spirit of Canis, a big black dog," said Tun, looking at Sirius.

"I guess you could say that. I can take the physical form of a dog." Sirius admitted uneasily.

His attention was fixed on Harry's lightning scar.

"An evil spirit resides here," said Tun, tracing the scar with one of his fingers. Harry had to fight back the urge to shudder from his touch. Suddenly, the Javanese Shaman turned contemplative.

"The price to remove the soul is death and you're not ready," murmured Tun. There was a troubled expression on his face. "This is but a small fragment of his soul. I sense that he has split his soul a few times before this and this is the final piece. You should keep it if you wish to find the others. It tends to attract the other pieces of soul."

"Merlin's beard, a few times?" Oswald declared, scrubbing his face with his hand and it was apparent that he knew about certain dark rituals. His family had always bordered on the darker side of magic, thus making him more aware.

"What do you know about it?" asked Amelia.

"There are certain dark rituals to divide the soul. I've heard of them briefly. How would a person Lord Voldemort get his hands on such information? They are well kept secrets of the dark ancient families."

"Yeah, the access to those libraries is limited." Sirius answered with a look of confusion. "Even I've never had the permission to enter that library when I was young."

"Well, he's an heir of Slytherin through his mother's side," said Harry, remembering the brief conversation he had with the memory of Riddle.

Oswald looked distressed at the declaration. "Merlin's Beard, he's one of us."

A/N: Hi for the wonderful reviews. I'm sorry for the long delay and I bet you didn't see this one coming. I know some of you were looking forward to a Christmas with Krum but I felt that the four ancient families just needed their time together. It's really fun writing this chapter since I took the chance to experience these areas myself. The information is historically accurate and I kept it in the timeline so you don't have the newer attractions in Singapore.

Have a blessed week.

Just a little information about Southeast Asia

It consists of countries like Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar (Burma), Cambodia, Thailand, The Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, East Timor and Indonesia and they are located South-east of China.

All countries except Thailand were once colonised.

Chapter 36: The End of Christmas Holidays

Beta-read by Frustr8dwriter

"Merlin's beard, he's one of us."

There were lines of distress etched deeply into his face when Oswald, Head of the Ancient House of Greengrass, made that statement very quietly. The disclosure was like a jolt in the blue and it left them all speechless. The presence of the foreign wizards was soon forgotten. Cheng Tze and Tun, sensing that the group needed a moment, slipped quietly into one of the rooms.

It took a while for Amelia to gather her wits.

"What do you mean one of us?" echoed Amelia, perplexed. "One of the Ancient families?"

Oswald stood up and paced around the small dark room. "It was supposed to be a secret between three Ancient families, now two really - I didn't think the Gaunts had a successor."

"So in the past, there were five Ancient families? Why isn't that recorded in any of the books in the Potter library?" Hermione inquired, knitting her brows in a frown. "I've been gathering as much information about the Ancient Families as possible. It seems implausible that I would never have heard of a fifth family."

Oswald chuckled, knowing that it would take a while for Hermione to digest the fact that books may not be completely accurate.

"Ah, that's simple – the Gaunts haven't really done much to earn their place in written history. Well really, the only thing that they could take pride in was being the descendants of Salazar Slytherin."

"The Gaunts...where have I heard that name somewhere before?" Amelia murmured absently, staring into space. Her eyes lit up suddenly. "I remember! We did a case study on an incident with the Gaunts in one of the Auror training sessions. The Ministry needed a

fully armoured team to haul just two men in. I remembered watching the memory of a Ministry worker."

"Yes, Marvolo and Morffin Gaunt. All the inbreeding in that family made them all quite mad," supplied Oswald. "I was told that those two were the last of their line. All they had left was a run-down shack by my grandfather's time. I believed the Gaunts' marriages to the Greengrasses and Blacks, the other two families that were equally attracted to the dark magic, were the only way their line even survived that long. When the pact was drawn between our ancestors, the Gaunts had a falling out with the Blacks and the Greengrasses and began to marry within their own family. They never had much importance in society despite their title, so others gladly shunned them."

So Lord Voldemort was really a Lord in his own right, a Head of an Ancient Family. Harry thought.

"So what happened to the library that contained all those books on the Dark Arts?" Amelia asked.

Oswald chuckled and rubbed his chin. "I'm not sure if I should even tell you anything about it, Am, because of the firm stand you have against the Dark Arts, just like your ancestors."

"The Dark Arts require the sacrifice of lives. Is there any reason why we shouldn't be against it? Why, we wouldn't have an immortal soul on our hands if those materials had been destroyed in the first place," grumbled Amelia.

"It's just a different side of the coin, Am. I believe the way Dark Arts are used depends on the intent of the caster, but I digress." Oswald turned slightly to regard the rest of the room, noticing that he had the full attention of everyone in the room and he launched into a quick lecture of History. "The library was established by the Greengrass, Black, and Gaunt families when it became clear that the Ministry was going to ban all Dark Arts material. The Bones and the Potter families had always frowned upon the use of dark magic since, as Am has already pointed out; some of the rituals require human sacrifice. As much as I hate to admit this, the three other Ancient families had no

qualms about using Muggles in these rituals or as testing subjects. The Bones and Potter families used their influence to push the Ministry to pass a ban of the Dark Arts and they were successful."

This information wasn't anything new to Harry. He already knew that the ban of the Dark Arts was one of the causes of the rift between the Four Ancient Families.

"I'm sure you've all learned about this since it has been documented in the history books. What wasn't common knowledge was that the three other families decided to build a secret library in a neutral location, signed a treaty among us, and only granted the Heads of each family access to that library to keep it secret. Since the Gaunts' line was supposed to die out and Lord Black most certainly didn't tell Sirius the secret, I had the impression that the secret would die with me."

"Why don't you just destroy the library and its contents?" asked Daphne, looking at her father.

"I wish I could. It would definitely make things easier. The problem is, our ancestors had thought of that possibility as well. They knew that the Ministry would try to destroy the library if they discovered it, so they placed a magical field so strong that if you tried to even damage the library, you'd end up taking out a large chunk of everything surrounding it. I estimated the monetary worth of the damage it would cause destroying that said library would be colossal..."

"Because it's sitting right under the Ministry of Magic," deduced Hermione, her eyes narrowing at the thought.

Oswald gave a short laugh. "Hermione's right as usual. Demolishing it would detonate a magic field that would blow the heart of London into pieces. I believe it would raze both the magical and non-magical political institutes in a flash. I imagine such devastation would be difficult to keep from the Muggles."

Sirius chuckled in amusement. "How sly of them. The Ministry would never think of looking right under their feet and they would be much

too terrified to break the statute of secrecy by destroying it even if they knew about it."

It was clear that it was a better choice to keep his words to himself - her glare turned lethal when Amelia turned to look at him.

"I thought the same as well so I didn't want to make a fuss out of it," said Oswald to himself.

"Your-damn-ancestors!" To emphasize each word, Amelia jabbed Sirius's arm painfully.

"Hey! It's not my fault!" yelled Sirius, shifting away from his incensed fiancée. "I knew nothing about this."

Harry couldn't help but be entertained while watching Amelia vent her frustrations on his poor godfather.

"Couldn't you just block the two other Heads from gaining entrance to the library?" Cedric asked Oswald, ignoring the couple entirely. Daphne, who was sitting beside him, rolled her eyes inwardly at Amelia and Sirius's antics.

Oswald threw his head back and laughed. "No, Cedric. Even though we were all related by marriage, we remained very distrustful of one another. The treaty they signed prevented the removal of the materials and artefacts as well as any of the families turning on each other."

"Afraid that any one family might absorb the entire collection?" quipped Astoria, laughing.

"I would think that the temptation of having the comprehensive Dark Art Library at your personal disposal is hard to resist," said Oswald. His eyes narrowed slightly. "You do know you're laughing at your own ancestors?"

Astoria gave an indifferent shrug.

"The pure-blood driven politics of the past is really screwed up," commented Dan in amusement, placing a hand on his wife's shoulder. "Well, I understand the need for the pact between the four families now. I must admit that the families have been really devious."

"Sorry to interrupt this history lesson, but I think we have more important things to discuss. Oh I don't know... like the piece of Lord Voldemort's soul in Harry," spoke Susan and the room grew eerily silent at once. They returned their attention to Harry. Harry averted his eyes, with a frown on his face.

"We can't make hasty decisions with so little information," said Amelia finally.

"Os, why don't you read up on the process of splitting a soul?" Sirius suggested. "This way we'll have a better idea about how to deal with the situation."

Oswald's tone became clipped. "No, I can't. The Dark Arts entices all of us. I'm not going to tempt myself."

Before Sirius could protest, Harry spoke first.

"There's no need for anyone to research the Dark Arts. I'm not going to do anything that risks Hermione's life," said Harry, looking at all of them at the eye. It was absolutely clear to all that he was nothing but resolute.

"Our lives, Harry," corrected Hermione, intertwining their fingers together. He gave her a small smile at her show of support.

"I'm not saying that we won't destroy Lord Voldemort. We can't let the sacrifices of the previous war go to waste. If the decision of getting rid of him for good boils down to destroying the piece that's in me, then we'll take the risk," said Harry. Hermione nodded in agreement.

"As you've decreed, Lord and Lady Gryffindor." Oswald said gravely, with a smile on his face.

Dan and Jean exchanged looks briefly. After a moment, it was Jean who relented and she let out a sigh of resignation. Dan placed his hand on Harry's shoulder in an unmistakable sign of support.

"You know how we feel, Harry." Cedric voiced, speaking on behalf of his friends both present and absent from the room.

The other Heads nodded in agreement. "Then we'll have to find a way to remove it without harming them."

As if on cue, Tun and Cheng Tze walked back into the room. "We've discussed the situation for a long while. We believe there is a slim chance that your bond might be able to pull you through the process since the fragment is not joined to your bonded souls, contrary to our earlier beliefs," said Tun contemplatively.

"We don't know much about the powers of the heavenly couple, after all the two of you are joined in a very special way. It may turn out to not be as dangerous as we believe," continued Cheng Tze.

"Well, that's reassuring," commented Daphne sarcastically.

Cheng Tze chuckled deeply.

"The world is very much a mystery, young lady. We can't be so arrogant to claim that we know all the secrets of it but I believe in the balance between darkness and light." Cheng Tze said, stroking his long beard.

"Faith is just not enough." Amelia interjected, a frown marring her face.

"Yet without faith, things become even more impossible. What is life without hope? I know of instances where it boils down to one's attitude," replied Cheng Tze.

"I need some time to look into this." Tun declared finally. "The process is so obscure that I'm sure that not many would possess the information you require."

"You're willing to help us?" asked Oswald guardedly, staring at the Javanese Shaman.

Tun chuckled deeply. "It's too late for suspicions. The case has caught my attention and I'm intrigued. I'm going to consult with the other elders and the spirits. It may take months before I can find anything useful. However, I do agree with Cheng Tze. Sometimes, all you need is faith."

Tun asked them for a contact number so that they could keep in touch with them once they've left Singapore.

They could believe their ears when they heard that the wizards in Great Britain did not use telephones.

Jean and Dan agreed to act as a go-between between the two parties, after they realised it would be much safer that way. Realising that it was way past dinnertime, they rose to their feet, thanked the two for their time before exiting the shop.

It was a bizarre experience for all of them and it was clear that they all needed to sit down to talk about what they learned. Harry collected the Chinese painting from the artist and they headed back to the Raffles hotel for a quiet dinner in the Tiffin Room.

The Tiffin Room was restored to its former glory so the ambience reflected the simple neo-classical colonial look of the early eighteenth century. It featured square teak tables and bentwood chairs, silver vases and salt and pepper shakers that didn't look anachronistic with the setting. Dining in such a restaurant transported them back to that period.

They were led to a private room, which was similarly refurbished, but on a grander scale. They decided to try the Curry Buffet, which boasted Northern Indian speciality dishes. Servers dressed in snowy white jacket attended to their needs. They were told that the Tiffin Curry, a mild curry chicken, was one of the highlights of their menu. They found themselves enjoying every dish they selected.

Harry managed to cast the relevant spells to maintain their privacy right before Amelia began her diatribe.

"Weapons, Harry and Hermione? Why are you carrying them around?" demanded Amelia, crossing her arms over her chest as she stared at the young couple. "You know it's not allowed in both the magical and non-magical worlds. What were you guys thinking?"

"Our wands may not be enough." Hermione responded briskly. "We aren't taking any chances."

Amelia frowned and leaned forward. "Give me a little credit, Hermione. You're carrying a gun that you've transfigured into something wooden. You can't hide that you're using one if you did."

"No, this is something new," disagreed Harry. "It fires spells that are transfigured into bullets, and it will leave no mark."

"How is that even possible? Can you transfigure something that doesn't have a physical state?" Cedric interrupted.

Oswald was rubbing his chin contemplatively.

"What Harry said is absolutely possible. It's difficult to explain the science behind it, but spells do have a physical state. The red light we see is made up of small particles. It's just a matter of combing through and transfiguring multiple objects into a singular object," explained Hermione.

"Whatever works. You have to do a demonstration later, Hermione," said Sirius, with a smile on his face.

"She's a sharp shooter." Harry announced proudly, putting his arm over her shoulder.

"How about your sword, Harry?" asked Jean. It was a shock for her when she discovered that he had been carrying a sword with him.

"It's the Sword of Gryffindor. There have been other heads before me who've carried it as an emblem of authority."

"Only on special occasions, Harry." Amelia rebuked, shaking her head. "We don't carry them anymore. Swords are too flashy and no one makes them anymore."

"Rules aside and think about it, Am. Would Riddle think that they'd be using such weapons? Personally, I think it's good that they're carrying them around for protection. He won't even know what hit them," said Felicia. "It's a brilliant idea, Hermione."

"There'll hell to pay if others discover that you two are carrying weapons with you. You're a Lord, a Lord of an Ancient and Noble House. It would make things even more complex. First the elemental magic, second, your weapons, finally your rings, what other secrets are you keeping?" Amelia went on, clearly exasperated.

Hermione immediately picked out the reason of her protest.

"Complex? You mean make things complex with the Ministry? What's going on in the Ministry?" said Hermione suddenly, leaning back so that she could look at Amelia. "Is the Ministry targeting us?"

"Not the Ministry, just Fudge and his minions. He's trying to get more power for himself by undermining ours." Oswald replied uninterestedly. "He's not a threat because Am still commands more respect than he does so we can allow him to play his little political games."

"Fudge has been stirring up a lot of unrest in the Ministry lately. However, the DMLE is the largest and most important branch of the Ministry and it's firmly in my control so he can't do much," added Amelia absently.

"I beg to differ - a small spark is all it takes to set a forest ablaze." Hermione interjected. "Circumstances can change in a snap of fingers. I'd rather not take those risks."

"Okay, enough of this heated discussion. It's going nowhere." Oswald declared, raising his voice slightly so that he had Hermione and Amelia's attention. "There is no need to squabble amongst ourselves

when Hermione has correctly pointed out that we have two enemies." His statement had its intended effect - both Amelia and Hermione kept their silence.

Oswald scrubbed his face with his hands before he expelled a breath. "It's clear we have several issues – the secrets Harry and Hermione have been keeping from family, our problems handling the Ministry, and the issue of carrying weapons. We are going to discuss all of them like civilised people, do you understand? If you need time-out to keep your anger in check, feel free to leave the room."

Everyone around the table nodded their heads.

He turned to look at Harry and Hermione. "Why do you see a need to keep secrets from us? Aren't we a family? I mean even if you don't trust us to keep your secrets, there is still an unbreakable vow between our families," asked Oswald.

"No, it's not about trust. It's all about protecting all of you. We're sorry if you feel that way." Harry offered.

"It's alright, pup. Just don't make it a habit. We owe you an apology for keeping the problem with the Ministry a secret, so I'm sorry. In truth, you and Hermione are the same status as us. However, we can't help trying to keep things away from you, so that you can concentrate on more important things. Anyway, if we want you to be completely honest with us, we have to be completely candid with you too," said Sirius, smiling.

"Okay, what are we going to do about Fudge? Do you really want to leave him alone?" Susan inquired.

"I'm not trying to be proud, but he's a harmless git who is absolutely clueless about who's he dealing with. We'll have him for lunch, metaphorically speaking, if he does anything." Sirius assured, grinning fiercely. "We've been keeping watch."

"Well, as long as we don't underestimate him. Things will change drastically when the Magical society knows that Voldemort's back." Hermione reminded.

"We'll continue to monitor him. So that solves another problem, let's move on to the final issue," said Oswald.

"I don't see why they should stop carrying weapons with them." Jean commented. "You're worried about their safety and these weapons offer additional protection. I know it's against the law, but they're up against this immortal Dark Lord. Shouldn't there be an exception?"

"Well, it's the political tidal wave that they will generate if anyone finds out," explained Daphne. "The backlash can potentially turn the tide against us if the issue is not handled properly and Fudge can use that to his advantage." She smiled when she caught Oswald nodding in affirmation.

"Yeah, but it might save their lives," added Dan.

"Save their lives from Lord Voldemort? No one, besides us, knows that Lord Voldemort is still alive. The consequences of opening that particular can of worms are unimaginable," continued Daphne evenly. "Well personally, I don't really think this whole weapon issue matters in light of everything."

Oswald chuckled. "I guess that means only one person is opposed to Harry and Hermione carrying their weapons around with them?"

Amelia rolled her eyes. "I didn't arrest them on the spot, did I? I felt I had to put in my two cent's worth. The rules are created for a reason and I'm the Head of DMLE, the department that enforces the rules - I can't head the department if I don't believe in the laws."

Sirius laughed and wrapped his arm around his fiancée. "We know what a law-abiding citizen you are."

Amelia narrowed her eyes and smacked him on his arm.

Harry removed the charms that he cast when he realised that they had concluded their discussion. To be honest, he was relieved to have everything out in the open; he felt that he no longer needed to

keep secrets from them and that the burden of this upcoming war no longer rest solely on his and Hermione's shoulders.

They retreated back to their rooms for a good night's rest, seeing that everyone was exhausted.

The next few days in Singapore were spent in high spirits. Everyone was determined to enjoy the small island country to the maximum. They spend a day at each of the ethnic enclaves like Little India, Kampong Glam, and Arab Street, trying the different cuisines and experiencing the varying cultures. They even had their hands painted with a dye from the Henna plant. Brown intricate designs began from the tips of their fingers and radiated out to cover every inch of their hands and wrists – the designs a stark contrast against their fair skin. They got to know the island a bit better when they visited the many area museums and took a heritage walk around Civic District.

They were game enough to try hiking up Bukit Timah reserves, the tallest hill in Singapore. It was physically harsh on the adults due to their lack of exercise but the teenagers had a lot of fun. The trek offered a refreshing change of scenery from the urban landscape they were staying in and it was an experience they would never forget. Harry knew that none of his family would be trying the Rambutan, a sweet bright red fruit, anytime soon. They had been walking into the reserve for about ten minutes when they realised that they had walked into an area filled with Rambutan trees. It was a pretty sight because they were bearing clusters of bright, red fruits that stood out among the lush green leaves.

"Do you think the fruits could be eaten?" asked Cedric curiously, staring at the closest tree. The fruits were located at the crown of the tree, so he couldn't try them.

"Yes, look, the monkeys are feeding on them," said Harry, pointing to a distant tree where a large group of brown monkeys were seen sitting on the branches, happily plucking those fruits, peeling them open, discarding their red shells, before spitting out the seeds.

"That explains why we've been walking all over the shells of these fruits," commented Oswald wryly, staring at the monkeys from a

distance. Suddenly, he felt something being thrown on him and he dismissed it. When he felt something sticky being thrown at him the second time, he shouted in irritation and looked up.

A few monkeys were sitting on a branch close to them, eating Rambutans. There was a decidedly mischievous smirk on their faces when they saw Oswald looking at him. One of them brazenly peeled open another brilliant red fruit, took aim at him, and flung the shell at his head.

"Those bloody monkeys!" Oswald roared. He fumbled around his pocket, trying to find his wand as the rest of his family unsympathetically burst out in laughter.

"They're only monkeys, Os."

To Oswald's horror, that same monkey spat out the large seed of the fruit, took another aim, and tossed it at him.

"Eww!" shouted Astoria when the other monkeys started to fire 'bullets' at all of them.

"Run!" said Cedric when he realised that the monkeys were starting a war with them.

With their hands covering their heads, they ducked the incoming missiles and dashed to safety.

The last thing they remembered were the howls of the monkeys echoing around the reserve, sounding as if they were laughing at their cowardice. They had become a source of entertainment for the residents of the reserve.

They visited the Night Safari, located next to the Singapore Zoo which was said to be the world's first, for an interesting experience. The Night Safari was built to look like traditional villages of the past and the moment they stepped in, they felt as though they were transported to another time. These old 'attap' huts housed several retail shops. Harry and Cedric were attracted to the sight of a man who was sitting on a bench above a long tank, soaking his feet in it. A

black cloud seemed to form around his feet and the man appeared to be trying to stifle his laughter. Intrigued, Harry and Cedric took a closer look and found that the black cloud was actually made up of a large school of small fish that seemed to be feeding on his feet.

"Would you like to try the Fish Spa? It's therapeutic and it removes the dead skin from your feet," said one of the retail assistants politely, gesturing to the tank, ignoring the look of horror and curiosity on their faces.

Cedric gave a nervous smile. "It looks ... interesting." Cedric finally said, taking several steps away from the shop.

"I'm glad you think so," called out Harry, standing near the counter inside the shop. No one had noticed that he had entered the shop. "Because I've just paid for you to have a go at it."

Cedric's jaws immediately drop at the news. "M-me? You're the Gryffindor here!"

"Well, that's a situation that can easily be resolved," interjected Oswald with a smile, walking to the counter and brandishing his wallet. He paid for two more people to try the fish spa. "Why don't we give the Gryffindors a chance to display their valour?" He flashed a bright and fierce smirk at Sirius and Harry.

Ha! It's payback time! Oswald thought.

"What!" Sirius exclaimed, his eyes widening at the suggestion.

"Don't tell me you going to chicken out, Sirius? Did the Sorting Hat place you in the wrong house?" mocked Oswald, raising one of his brows as he approached them.

Daphne turned to look at Harry meaningfully.

"I never said I was chickening out!" Sirius sputtered defensively as his cheeks grew pink.

Oswald placed his hands on his waist in an akimbo, with a pointed look directed at Sirius.

Defeated, Sirius walked towards the preparation area to have his feet washed.

What? I didn't do anything. Harry innocently thought through their link as soon as he noticed the exasperated look on Hermione's face as she entered the shop and prepared for the fish spa, with him by her side. They had to remove their shoes and wash their feet at the sink before they were led to one of the two huge tanks.

They climbed onto the bench, eying those tiny fish cautiously. Taking a deep breath as if they were free-fall jumpers taking their first unassisted leap, they plunged their feet into the tank.

They didn't have to wait long.

The tiny fish immediately dashed to nibble on their feet as if they haven't been fed for a long time.

"AHHH!" screamed Hermione, flinging her arms and legs wildly.

The sensation of the fish nibbling on the soles of her feet, between her toes, and on every inch of the skin of their feet was so ticklish, she couldn't help screaming.

Harry threw his head back and laughed, tickled both by the reaction of Hermione and fish. He stopped laughing immediately when Hermione grabbed his arm in a powerful death grip.

Harry gently eased her hand off his arm.

A large smile broke out on Sirius face excitedly when he realised it wasn't that bad after all and he wiggled his toes as he sank into his seat. "It feels quite good," said Sirius.

"You're chasing my fish away." Harry protested when he realised that the waves that Hermione's fidgeting had caused were chasing the

fish to the opposite end of the tank. He put his hands on her thighs and held her legs still.

The fish immediately gathered around her feet and that sent her bursting in fits of uncontrollable laughter, much to the hilarity to the small crowd that had gathered to watch them. Harry gave a dejected sigh after noticing that his fish had once again fled from his feet.

He slid across the bench to put some distance between him and Hermione. The fishes soon returned to nibble on his feet. Harry watched in amusement the way Hermione would alternate between bursting into unrestrained laughter and squirming.

"Well, after watching that, the money I paid for them to try the Fish Spa was well worth it!" Oswald announced with a laugh.

After the three finished their foot treatments, they caught a show featuring the natives of the Borneo Rainforest and their rituals. They demonstrated the ability to produce the sound of bird's chipping by blowing through leaves, pressed tightly between their fingers. Jean was invited to join the Thumbunaka Tribe members. She was asked by one of the exotic natives to use the blowpipe to burst the black balloon held between the legs of one of the tribal men.

Looking at the unsteady way Jean was holding the long wooden pipe; the tribal man tried to flee from the cruel assignment but was held firmly by his friends.

He desperate covered his groins with his hands and gave a silent prayer.

Jean took a deep breath, aimed and blew into the pipe.

"Oh no!" Someone exclaimed.

The needle struck the poor man on his inner thigh, causing him to howl in pain as his friends and the audience laughed at him. He promptly collapsed on the ground, feigning his death.

Naturally, the tribal man had his chance for payback. With a blindfold around his eyes, he had to use the blowpipe to burst the balloon that Jean was holding.

Hermione laughed at the way her mother was holding the balloon as far from her body as possible as the man took his aim.

With a loud 'pop', the balloon had burst, and Jean walked down the stage with legs made of jelly.

Dan and Sirius couldn't help but tease her about her performance as they applauded. The tribe wowed the guests with their dance moves and their fire-blowing techniques.

The audience basked in the heat created by the flames.

"They look like dragons, blowing flame that way," commented Cedric, making a face as Daphne laughed.

They officially started their journey into the Night Safari after the show. It was an eye-opener: most of the animals were nocturnal, so the group had the rare opportunity of observing these animals' natural behaviour at the night. The enclosures were built to resemble their native habitats.

They rode on a tram, which took them through many areas of the zoo.

"Now, on your right, ladies and gentlemen, we have the Indian Wolves..."

Harry couldn't help but notice how low the full moon was hanging in the starless sky. It even appeared to be touching the large cliff that stood majestically in the wolves' enclosure. A beautiful lone wolf, illuminated by the soft white glow of the moon, trotted to the edge of that cliff with purpose clearly reflected in its eyes.

The guests clamoured to the side to get a good look of the wolf.

Harry felt the excited chattering in the tram quiet down slightly as he turned to watch the powerful beast. The voice of the tour guide slowly faded into the background until it was inarticulate noise.

There was a sudden breeze.

He could feel the light wind ruffling the wolf's shiny fur. He was assaulted by strange mixture of scent-human sweat and mosquito repellent that wafted in the air. He could hear the clicking of cameras, the distant sound of wheels rolling across the road, and the whispering of the forest.

Harry was jolted back to reality when the tram went over a small bump.

"We're leaving the Indian wolves behind ..."

He blinked twice, before realising what had happened - he had made a connection with the animal.

The wolf arched its back gracefully and let out a howl.

The sight of the wolf slowly faded from his sight as the tram took a turn but the echoes of its solitary howl continued to reverberate through the reserve throughout the rest of the ride.

It was way past midnight when they finally reached their hotel.

Sunlight seeped through the curtains of the bedroom, giving the large bedroom a glow. Harry groggily climbed out of his bed, feeling unusually relaxed and cool. "Happy Christmas," greeted Hermione, slipping into the bed to kiss him on his lips. "I was wondering how much longer you were going to sleep."

"It doesn't feel at all like Christmas," said Harry, wrapping his arms around her, drawing her into his embrace. "More like summer holidays." The temperature of the room was set at nineteen degrees Celsius; there was an absence of a fireplace and snow. "Yes, definitely like summer," said Harry, nuzzling her neck.

She chuckled. "It's an equatorial country, Harry," said Hermione, with amusement in her voice. "The lack of snow doesn't stop Singapore from celebrating it though. Get yourself freshened up. Daph, Sue, and Cedric are in the living room talking to everyone back home through the mirror."

He obediently headed to the bathroom to freshen up, leaving Hermione to talk to their friends who had stayed up to exchange Christmas greetings. Fred and George invited them over to the Weasley home when they returned. The presents they had sent from Singapore for the Weasleys arrived on time and they all seemed to like what they had received.

The Weasley twins were green with envy when they realised that the group had been having a wonderful time. They definitely enjoyed hearing about the prank that Harry had pulled on Oswald at the Singapore Zoo.

"Watching Hermione at the Fish spa was hilarious," said Susan, laughing as Hermione pinked. "She was screaming and laughing at the same time."

"That's a memory I must see - the well-mannered Hermione losing her composure!" Fred admitted, chuckling.

"Well, I'll be more than willing to show you," answered Susan, ignoring Hermione's glare.

Fred grinned widely.

The teenagers chatted for a while before ending the call with promises to tell them more about their adventures in Singapore as soon as they got home – they were leaving the next day. After bidding the twins goodbye, the group headed down to Amelia's suite to open their presents. The females were surprised when their partners gave them each a rather large box. Susan and Astoria were surprised to receive a similar looking box from Sirius and Oswald respectively.

"Well, this is the first Christmas we're celebrating together in Singapore, so we've decided to do something special." Oswald explained, smiling. "The presents were selected by your partner but given on the behalf of the rest of the guys."

Intrigued, they began unwrapping the boxes. The girls found stunning cheongsams, body-hugging traditional Chinese costumes, with matching heels and accessories. It was clear that they had spared no expense for the outfits. There was silence in the room as the males looked on anxiously, waiting for them to react.

"How did you all manage to do this? I didn't think any of you had the time to do so much planning. I can see why it's a gift from all of you. It's wonderful!" Amelia proclaimed, lifting out a stunning bronze number with several large fiery phoenixes embroidered on it. "Is there a reason why we're receiving Cheongsams for Christmas?"

Sirius smiled proudly before replying with a mysterious smile on his face. "Always the sharp one. This is just part one of our Christmas gift to you."

They had lunch at one of the coffee shops after they had finished exchanging presents. The girls were chauffeured to a salon the males had arranged so that they could prepare for their surprise that evening.

Night soon fell upon the city.

It had been a few hours since Hermione had seen either Harry or any of the guys. He had even put up a mental barrier between them to prevent her from finding out what they had in store for them. Sitting next to her, her mother, looking stunning in the royal blue cheongsam embroidered with large blooming peony, was absolutely thrilled. It had been a while since Hermione's father had done anything remotely romantic for her. Hermione felt like it was almost a re-enactment of the Tri-Wizard Ball. Daphne was sitting quietly, watching the landscape passing outside the car.

Her pearl white cheongsam embroidered with many small dragons was exquisite and it felt like a second skin.

The scenery of the urban jungle of Singapore had passed a while ago as the car took a turn and drove up the winding roads of a hill. Hermione briefly caught a sight of a wooden sign announcing "Mount Faber" at the turn. Trees and undergrowth of various sizes soon dotted the view outside the window and they felt as if they were driving through an uninhabited forest.

The pockets of land reserved for forests no longer surprised her; however, she was astonished that this was where they were headed.

The car soon halted in front of a building.

A befuddled Amelia, Felicia, Astoria and Susan soon joined the intrigued Hermione, Jean, and Daphne. They looked absolutely ravishing in the dresses that they were given for Christmas.

"This way," said the driver, leading them to the building. The Jewel Box, as the place was called, was a beautiful building that integrated nature and style. Elegant Hiba wood arches filled with creepers lined the walking paths.

Standing at the large glass entrance of the building were the guys, dressed neatly for the occasion. Harry was grinning happily at his gorgeous wife.

You look ravishing, commented Harry, through their link, before taking her hand. "Our dinner is served," he said, leading her into the building. The floors were of a rich hardwood and large glass panels surrounded the entire restaurant. They were greeted warmly by a restaurant host and were led inside.

Granted that The Jewel Box was a nice place to dine in, but they had eaten in far more luxurious places. Hermione couldn't fathom what the surprise was.

A small smile appeared on his face when he heard Hermione's thoughts but he chose to keep his silence. Hermione gasped when she saw several sparkling cable cars parked within the building through one of the glass panels. The cable cars were brightly

decorated with lights and she could now see the candlelit dinner prepared for them.

The strong winds tousled her thick hair as she stepped into the holding area for the cable car. They were quite a distance away from ground and the cable car would take them across sea.

"We thought you all might want to try Sky Dining. After all, it offers of a splendid view of the harbour and the Singapore skyline. The whole place is reserved for us tonight. It's our last night in Singapore and I really wanted you to have a taste of her splendour over dinner," said Harry, smiling. He led her into the first cable car.

The six other seats were flipped up and there was a music system in the cabin. A table set for two had already been prepared and it looked very comfortable. A small lamp was placed in the cable car, giving the cable car a soft and warm glow. A professional photographer took a photograph of them together as they stepped into the cabin and settled into their seats.

The panoramic windows lined the cabin, offering them a good look of the outside.

"Wait, are we going to have dinner as the cable car takes us across the sea?" asked Hermione finally.

Harry chuckled. "That was the intention." They could hear the gasp of shock by Jean and Amelia when they stepped into the building and realised that they were going to have a romantic dinner in a moving cable car.

It was a first time for many of them to even sit in a cable car, and now they were given the rare opportunity to dine in one.

When they all were finally settled at their respective tables, their last dinner at Singapore officially began as the large wheel began to turn. With a jerk, the cable car slowly departed from the building as it travelled slowly across the sea towards the adjourning island, Sentosa. They were offered a breathtaking sight of the brightly lit

skyscrapers of the Central Business District of Singapore as they dug into their mouth-watering dinner.

"Mum can't complain that Dad has never done anything remotely romantic after this." Hermione commented. "Sue and Astoria got the shorter end of the stick since this experience is best enjoyed with your partner."

"I doubt they think so. Sue and Astoria were equally excited. It's the first time to even see a cable car, much less ride in one. And now, they're having dinner when hovering in air," returned Harry. "Anyway, what's with my Christmas present? Why are you waiting until when we're back in school to give it to me?"

"Because it's only useful there. I decided on this present after much thought." Hermione replied, shrugging. "But I won't tell you what it is, no matter how much you try to get it of me."

Harry gave an indifferent shrug and he was soon consumed with his own thoughts as he returned his attentions to the skyline of Singapore.

Singapore, a business hub for South-east Asia, was one of the most prospering nations in the region.

It was amazing that such a small island with limited resources, could actually make it so far despite all the odds, climbing out of the mire, and finally getting some sort of foothold. It was nothing short of a miracle. He had come to admire the country, how she refused to bow down to her Fate and managed to survive. It was a courage that he now needed to possess, in light of all the new discoveries they'd made.

Several cabins away, Astoria and Susan were excitedly staring out of the windows, taking in the splendid sight of Singapore.

"This is so amazing, I can hardly believe that we are having dinner while hovering in the air!" exclaimed Astoria.

"Yes and the view is absolutely breathtaking," said Susan. She caught sight of the cabin in front and saw Daphne and Cedric snuggling close to each other, admiring the scene. Without a thought, she let out a sigh.

Astoria, noticing how she was gazing at the couple in front of her, smiled.

"I heard that you've got quite a few admirers. Why don't you pick one of them so that you don't have to be alone?"

"That's the wrong reason to enter a relationship." Susan responded.

"Maybe so, but I really think you're just waiting for a certain someone to ask you out." Astoria declared.

Susan's cheeks pinked.

"Luna told me that on the night of the Tri-Wizard Ball, he couldn't keep his eyes off of you," said Astoria.

"Is that so?" murmured Susan thoughtfully, turning to look out of the window, missing the smile that was on Astoria's face.

Never had the couples wished so hard that the night would last forever, with such picturesque views, excellent food, and relaxing ambience. The couples chatted among themselves and finally toasted with their flutes of champagne to a Merry Christmas.

It was with reluctant hearts that all of them returned back home. It took a while for them to get used to the weather since it was snowing back at home. Cedric parted ways with them at the airport since he had promised to spend time with his family.

Amelia made arrangements to have a New Year's Eve party right at the Bones Tower, the official residence of the Bones Family, since they had been out of the country for Christmas.

Charles and his team of house elves cheerfully welcomed their master and mistress back when the couple finally returned to the

Potter Mansion. Crookshanks and Hedwig met them at the door, excited to see their owners again. It was the first time Harry had travelled abroad without his familiar and he was equally glad to see her.

Harry and Hermione personally greeted each member of their staff and personally handed them the Christmas presents they had picked up for them on their trip, bringing tears to most of their house elves' eyes because of their kindness. They spent the next few days at home. Sirius, Remus, the Grangers, and the Greengrasses joined them for breakfast every morning, a habit they had developed during the summer holidays. They all went their separate ways after the meal. However, sometimes the Grangers or Remus would accompany them to London or Diagon Alley.

Hermione honoured her promise on the second day of their return, demonstrating the use of her pistol in the training room. Naturally, they were in awe and it had opened the doors to more ideas and research when they realised that light could be transfigured.

Harry and Hermione dedicated the rest the time catching up with their own research. It was only days away from the second task and Harry had not found a suitable way of breathing underwater for long periods of time. Hermione, on the hand, was looking into the ways one could magically eavesdrop.

On New Year's Eve, everyone gathered in Bones Tower for dinner. Some of the teenagers did not get to see each other until that day since they had been spending their holiday with their family. Most of the teenagers chose to impose on the hospitality of the Bones and stayed overnight. The Weasley twins managed to convince their unwilling mother to let them do the same.

The residence was built to look like a castle more than a house, with four large towers connected to the main residence. The courtyard garden was beautiful, with light sheen of snow covering the ground. The building was easily as old as the Potter Mansion, judging from the design of the place – it had a very Old-World feel.

Most of their friends were already in the living room, chatting happily among them when Susan led the Grangers and the Potters into the room.

"Do all wizards live in such huge and ancient houses?" asked Jean when she took a good look at the high ceiling, large tapestry on the wall, and the gigantic fireplace as they stepped into the living room.

"You couldn't call our house large or old." Fred, who was sitting on one of the large armchair, responded. "It's only the Ancient and Noble families who have homes like this. They are very fond of their old buildings."

"Well, old houses tend to have a personality," defended Susan. "Well, historically, all the members of the Bones family have lived in this house. I've only known this place as home, so I don't really want to change a thing. Since almost everyone is here, let me show you to your rooms." Susan concluded, leading them up the stairs.

Large antique painted family portraits lined the walls of the hallways. The Bones Family, dressed in varying styles of robes, cheerfully greeted all their guests with waves and smiles.

"It's been while since this place was filled with people. There is usually only me and my Aunt, so please pardon them if they get too excited," explained Susan. Some of the people in the portrait started to move across the pictures just to take a better look at the guests.

"Amazing," said Jean. "They can move from one portrait to another!"

"Of course we can move!" added one of the occupants indignantly. "We aren't that old!"

"We mean no offence," said Jean, stopping to look at the old man. He looked like a dignified gentleman of the past; with neatly comb white hair and a great big moustache. "We're non-magicals. In our world, people in paintings don't move."

"A muggle did you say? I'm honoured to meet you!" said the old man brightly, smiling from ear to ear. "We usually steered clear of them

when I was alive. They would burn us at the stake if they discovered we could perform magic."

"I really need to show them to their rooms. You could speak to them later," interrupted Susan, steering Jean away.

They caught snatches of conversation of the occupants of the paintings as they continue to walk down the hallway.

"My my, they look so big. In our day, we were much smaller. I thought our descendants were giants at first. I wonder what they are feeding them these days," commented a lady with a quizzing glass to another curiously. They were slightly larger than a thumb.

Most of them had to stifle their laughter at that comment.

Susan showed them to each of their rooms and left her guests to clean up before dinner.

Viktor Krum, at Susan's invitation, joined them for dinner. He arrived ten minutes before dinner was served and met the Grangers and Potters on his way into the dining room.

Harry and Viktor exchanged greetings amicably. Hermione, who did not forget the way Viktor had hurt Harry, greeted him slightly coolly, much to Dan and Jean's surprise.

Dan nearly gaped when he realised that the young man was the star of the Quidditch World Cup. "Is he that Viktor Krum who was after you?" whispered Dan to Hermione when Harry cordially introduced him.

Hermione nodded.

"Was he the person who hurt Harry?" continued Dan. At Hermione's second nod, he finally understood the reason for Hermione's unfriendliness.

"Viktor, these are Hermione's wonderful parents, Dan and Jean," said Harry, smiling.

"So you're the culprit," declared Dan coolly, folding his arms, refusing the enthusiastic hand that Viktor had extended.

"Culprit, Sir?" asked Viktor timidly.

"The situation has been settled between us and we're friends now," said Harry, shaking his head. "He's here as Susan's guest."

Dan gave a curt nod before walking into the dining room, with Jean by his side.

Viktor expelled a breath he was holding. "Vow, He really treats you like a part of his family. I can definitely tell why I wouldn't stand a chance. " George roared in laughter. The Bulgarian Seeker gave a puzzled look.

"The way Harry and Hermione act, it's a surprise that they aren't married yet," said George, giving the couple a wink. Hermione narrowed her eyes.

Fred was standing quietly beside his twin brother, his arms folded in front of his chest.

Dan and Jean took the hint that their marriage was kept under wraps.

"She's too young to be married," answered Viktor in bafflement, causing George to burst out laughing.

"He's the joker of our group, ignore him." Susan interjected, putting on an overly warm smile. She was uncomfortable with the way Fred was staring at her. "Everyone's waiting in the dining room." She steered Viktor straight into the state dining room where the Greengrasses, Blacks, Lovegoods, Longbottoms, and the Diggorys had gathered.

The adults were chatting among themselves. There was no pulling of ranks within the four walls, just friends and families gathering to celebrate the passing of another year. Harry's face lit up at the sight of his first friend sitting at the table.

Hagrid greeted Harry and Hermione with wide smile on his face. They spoke for a while before the young couple went to their seats.

There was a new face in the room full of familiar ones. Harry recognised the new guest at once: it was Nymphadora Tonks. Her hair was a shocking bubblegum pink and she was sitting next to Remus Lupin, who looked wearier than the last time Harry had seen him. She appeared to be chatting with Remus cheerfully.

A smile touched his lips when Remus finally saw them. Standing up, he introduced Tonks to the Potters and Grangers.

Tonks clumsily knocked her goblet down when she extended her hand to the Grangers. "Oops!"

"Don't worry about it." Remus whipped out his wand and swiftly cleaned up the mess with a 'Scourgify' spell like a well-rehearsed routine.

Harry and Hermione exchanged pointed looks.

"I'm sorry for about," said Tonks sheepishly, grasping Dan's hand. "I'm Tonks."

"Just Tonks?" asked Dan, slightly confused, after shaking her hand.

"Wait, I remember you. Charlie told us about you. You're Nymphadora Tonks, that clumsy girl from Hufflepuff," Fred exclaimed.

She gave Fred a death glare before turning to answer Dan. "Yes, Mr. Granger, just Tonks."

"Don't mind him, Tonks, Fred speaks without thinking," interrupted Susan, smiling. Fred scowled but kept his silence, knowing that it would do him no good to speak up. Remus proceeded to introduce her to Harry and Hermione. Tonks appeared to be excited to finally meet them.

"I've heard a lot about both of you," said Tonks, smiling. "I like the way you're changing things at Hogwarts."

"Um... thanks I guess?" answered Harry, running his hand through his messy raven hair.

Tonks laughed.

Harry and Hermione joined their friends at the long table. Neville excitedly updated the couple on the past couple of weeks. Luna took the time to look at the henna on their hands carefully. Daphne, Cedric, and Cho were conversing among themselves.

Across the table, it was deathly silent. Fred appeared to be staring a hole into Viktor and Susan - as they were leaning close to each other, conversing quietly. It wasn't difficult for the onlookers to realise that Fred was carrying a torch for Susan. Sirius quietly nudged his fiancée and indiscreetly pointed out the fact to Amelia.

She arched an eyebrow.

"How did you spend your holiday, Viktor?" asked Harry politely, sensing the anger emanating from Fred.

"At Hogvarts. It vas peaceful vhen the school vas empty," offered Viktor, turning to regard Harry. "Sue vas just telling me that all of you vent to Singapore for Christmas and had a lot of fun. She particularly liked dining in the sky."

"Yes, we did. We had a good bird's-eye view of Singapore during our entire dinner," said Hermione, smiling.

"I'm sure you enjoyed your time with Harry. All the couples got a cabin to themselves," said Susan.

"Jealous that you didn't have a date during dinner?" teased George.

"Astoria was excellent company. I didn't feel left out at all," said Susan, as if challenging him to say otherwise. Astoria turned to look at George expectantly.

"It would've been great if Fred had been there," said Luna suddenly, causing Fred to spit out the pumpkin juice he was sipping. Daphne and Cedric quickly glanced at each other.

"Why do you think he should've been there?" enquired Sirius, watching Luna with great deal of interest. There was mirth reflected in his eyes.

"Susan would have enjoyed her stay in Singapore more if Fred had chosen to accompany her."

"What in Merlin's name, are you talking about, Luna?" Fred exclaimed.

"Now now, there's no need to get excited," said Lupin. "I'm sure what she meant was that all of you would have enjoyed your stay more if everyone was there."

Viktor cocked a brow in amusement.

"Exactly," said Susan, ignoring the way George was restraining himself from laughing too much.

"To set the record straight, if you're planning to date anyone, Sue dear. The boy in question must get my approval," said Amelia in a clipped tone, eying Fred. "I don't approve of boys who speak without thinking, possibly hurting the people around him with his mindless statements."

Fred swallowed visibly.

The conversation soon became livelier when they started to discuss Quidditch. They had everyone to share about their experiences flying or playing Quidditch.

"A broom can' suppor' my weigh'" said Hagrid. "It snapped into 'wo when I tried flying for the first time in 'ogwarts."

"We'll invent stronger brooms," said Oswald, with a smile. "You'll be our tester."

Even the stern Lady Longbottom surprised everyone with a story from her misshaped youth.

Everyone was shooed to the courtyard where they were treated to an impressive and majestic display of fireworks that Remus, Oswald, and the Weasley twins had jointly created for a full hour. It was with smiles on their faces, awe in their eyes as they entered into a new year.

With reckless abandonment, they wished one another a happy new year.

The teenagers retired to bed early since they had to catch the train back to Hogwarts later that afternoon.

It was with much dread that the teenagers bid goodbye to their families and embarked on a new semester at Hogwarts. The teenagers used the time in Hogwarts Express to catch up on their research and work.

Their familiars entertained one another with their own antics. Like their owners, they had become very good friends. They decided to hold a staring competition in the compartment.

"I think our pets are bored," commented Harry when he saw Hedwig and Katrina staring at one another intently without blinking as Callan and Crookshanks watched on keenly.

It was quite an odd scene, watching two cats and owls gathering together.

Ssh, I want to win. The others would have to give all their treats to the winner.

"You're going to make yourself sick that way, Hedwig." Harry said disapprovingly, shaking his head. His stunning owl ignored him,

continuing with the competition. It turned out that none of the pets were as good as Hedwig and she won the contest.

"I'm not going to give you any more treats this month," muttered Harry when he saw Callan and Katrina obediently handing all their treats to Hedwig.

They reached the castle at dinnertime and most of the students retired soon after.

Hermione handed Harry a small box when they had finally settled in for the night.

"Your Christmas present," said Hermione, smiling.

She had put up a mental wall to block her thoughts from him.

Curious, he opened the box. A greyish green slimy plant that looked like rattails lay inside.

"Gillyweed?" asked Harry in befuddlement as he stared at the present. "Why would I need..."

When Harry finally recalled the properties of Gillyweed, he threw his arms around Hermione wildly and planted an enthusiastic kiss on her lips.

"How I love you, Mione."

A/N: Hi everyone. Sorry for the long wait. Well, we'd a lot to do these few weeks. Thank you for reading, the next chapter should be posted next week. Have a blessed week.

Chapter 37: The Second Task

Beta by Frustr8dwriter

"You had that much fun in Singapore?" asked a surprised Hannah, after hearing her good friend Susan share tales of her holiday with her. They were sitting comfortably in their own four-poster beds, catching up. Even though Susan spent most of her time with Harry and his friends, she and Hannah were still very close.

Susan's usually plaited flaming red hair hung loosely around her shoulders and she was dressed simply in loose nightdress.

"We did. I think my Aunt really needed a getaway." Susan said, smiling. The smile turned into a frown suddenly. "Fred was being a bigger prick than usual at the New Year's Eve dinner. I thought that not having seen each other for thirteen days would make him less of a pain, but I was wrong. " Susan declared, rolling her eyes. He had spoken to her every night when she was in Singapore, as if he had really missed her. It frustrated her that he was back to treating her callously.

Hannah smiled knowingly.

"There's nothing going between me and Fred. I can't fathom why everyone's being saying that! I know that both of us have red hair and are single, but that's not a sufficient reason to put us together."

Hannah chuckled brightly. "You're usually more intuitive. You said that he's been blowing hot and cold towards you. Do you know when all of that started?"

Susan considered carefully. "Hmm...my opinion of him changed for the better when we were paired up during dance lessons a few months ago." Susan rolled her eyes. "Then he started acting like a total git at Tri-Wizard Ball."

"You invited Krum to your home for New Year's, right?" asked Hannah patiently.

"Yes, I don't see why Viktor's presence would have any effect on Fred's attitude towards me." Her tone was brusque.

"Come on Sue, Viktor was also your date to the Tri-Wizard Ball, right? Think about it: isn't Fred particularly nasty to you whenever Viktor's around?" She urged.

Susan grew uncomfortable at that thought. "We'll talk more tomorrow. Good night," said Susan abruptly, ducking under her covers.

Hannah's eyes were lit up in amusement.

"Sweet dreams, Sue," answered Hannah, drawing the curtains around her four-poster bed closed.

"Don't try getting close to Hermione or you'll regret it." He spun around, silently dismissing the other person.

Suddenly, he felt a solid fist connecting his jaws painfully.

Bright lights began to star behind his eyes as he staggered precariously.

He tripped, teetered, fell, and crashed.

The sound of water splashing was muted at once as the icy water consumed him.

He felt his lungs screaming excruciatingly from the lack of air.

No!

Pain swept through his body like a tidal wave as he felt himself sinking deeper and deeper into his watery grave.

He panicked and clawed desperately at the sharp rocks but was unable to stop his descent into the abyss.

"Harry! Harry!"

He shot out of his large comfortable bed, his body completely drenched in perspiration, his breathing erratic. Harry only expelled a sigh of relief when he realised where he was and that it was all merely a dream.

"Harry?" said Hermione, watching him worriedly. There was no hint of sleep in her eyes as she stared at him from their bed, only her rumpled appearance betrayed that fact. "Do you need a glass of water?"

He ran his hand through his hair haphazardly as he shook his head. "I'm fine, Angel." His voice sounded scratchy.

There was soft swooping noise and Hedwig presently appeared beside him. Her large amber eyes filled with concern as she observed him from the side. To get his attention, Hedwig lovingly nipped his fingers.

Are you alright?

A tiny, tired smile crept on his face as he stoked the fine, smooth feathers above her beak. Beads of perspiration had formed on his forehead. "Yeah, I am, Hedwig. I just had a bad dream."

He caught a glance of a pair of gleaming yellow eyes staring at him from the shadows. There was a slight dip of the bed when Crookshanks leapt onto the bed. He settled comfortably and stared at Harry.

That explains all the screaming and fraying. I thought a Death-eater had sneaked in.

"Crookshanks," warned Hermione softly. She nodded at the two familiars. Taking her cue, Hedwig gave Harry another affectionate nip before taking off while Crookshanks hopped off the bed and exited the room. Using magic, she turned some of the lights of their bedroom on. She handed him a glass of cold water.

Dobby brought this for you.

He finished the glass in one long gulp before placing it at the side. The cool liquid soothed his parched throat.

"Was I that loud?" asked Harry in a less husky voice, looking at Hermione. "This is the first time Hedwig and Crookshanks rushed in to check on me."

"No, but remember that they are connected to you." Hermione replied. "Was that how you felt then?"

She was referring to the time he nearly drowned in the Black Lake.

"Quite close." Harry admitted quietly. The thought of him even going near the lake made him tremble with sheer trepidation. With the second task merely a day away, it was hard to ignore the fact that he would have to swim in the Black Lake very soon. He frowned at the thought of it.

Suddenly, he felt Hermione squeezing his hand in a comforting manner.

"Sweetheart, it's normal for you to feel this way..."

"The second task requires me to enter the Black Lake. I d-don't think I can do it," said Harry, his tone betraying his fears.

Hermione's heart went to him - he looked exactly like a frightened fourteen-year old boy.

"Harry, this time there will be no sucker punch that would cause you to fall into the water in a semi-conscious state. You also know that you won't drown if you take the Gillyweed. Don't let your fear get to you, my love. You'll do wonderfully. You need your rest and we've a couple of hours more until morning."

"I'm worried about something else too," began Harry. "Let me show you."

He flashed the memory of the night he solved the riddle. He could sense Hermione's pride when she realised that he did it all by himself.

"We've taken what you'll sorely miss," mused Hermione. "Are you worried that they'll take me?"

He ran his hand through his dishevelled hair and nodded.

"I'd be more worried if they don't take me as your hostage. I have faith that you'll be able to rescue me. We can talk more about this later. Now, get some rest."

Before he could protest, Hermione drew him into her embrace and together, they fell back asleep.

"G-good m-morning," stammered Neville, running his hand through his hair when he realised that he was the second to arrive in the Chambers. "Um... Where are Harry and Hermione?"

"Good morning, Neville. They decided to sleep in this morning," said Luna dreamily, lifting her head from her upside-down magazine to look at him. Harry and Hermione were usually the earliest. She made some space at the table so that he could sit next to her.

Neville's cheeks pinked when Luna gave him a sweet smile.

There was several 'pops' and the Weasley twins appeared.

"Hey guys!" said George cheerfully. Spotting Luna and Neville alone, his grin widened. "Bad timing, huh? Well, we could make ourselves invisible." He whipped out his wand and cast a disillusionment spell on himself. His disillusionment spell was so weak that others could see outlines of his body.

"Gred, I can still see you." Fred pointed out.

"I can see you too!" answered George.

He arched one of his eyebrows. "That's because I'm not disillusioned?"

George tapped the wand on himself again and the spell ended. "Oh shucks, I guess we can't give these lovebirds some time alone."

"Hey!" said Neville, his cheeks turning completely red. Luna, on the other hand, was laughing gaily.

"Now where is Harrikins?" asked George, looking around. "Had too much fun with his Mione last night?"

"Stupefy!"

"Petrificus Totalus!"

A bolt of red light and white light struck George at the same time. He froze then crashed onto the ground. Harry and Hermione, with their wands out, stood by and looked on. Hermione folded her arms in front of her chest and looked at him.

Harry shook his head in amusement. "Should we revive him?" asked Harry, turning to look at the spectators. It was clear from the tired lines on his face that he did not have a good rest the previous night.

"No, I think he should be left the way he is so that he can serve as an example." Fred said with a smile. He squatted down so that he could get a closer look at his twin. "He looks kind of good lying in that odd angle."

Harry shook his head in disbelief. "You could be the one in that predicament, Fred."

The smirk on Fred's face widened. "Ah...The point is that I'm not."

It was minutes later that their other friends finally entered the chamber. They were quite shocked when they saw George in the state that Hermione and Harry had left him in.

"What happened to George?" asked Cedric worriedly.

Fred positioned himself next to his twin.

"My dear friends, the whole point of this demonstration is to emphasise that you're not to let your guard down especially when you're talking behind Harry and Hermione's backs." Fred lectured. Much to everyone's amusement, Fred hastily cast a shield to deflect Harry's sudden stunner.

The smirk on his face grew larger when he realised that he had just proven his point.

"Once bitten, twice shy," answered Fred.

"We've got work to do. Let's split up and work on our hand-to-hand after our warm-ups." Hermione suggested.

They broke up for their sparring lessons after Harry revived George. He was quite embarrassed that he was taken down so easily. Naturally, everyone took the opportunity to tease him. George remained on high alert the rest of the day, afraid that any of them would make good their threats and hex him.

"I'm not safe from even my twin brother," lamented George, eying Fred out of the corner of his eye, as the group headed down to the Great Hall for breakfast.

"I'm doing all this to keep you safe. You'll thank me for it one day," assured Fred with a wicked gleam in his eye.

Neville shook his head, amused that the brothers would turn on each other.

After sharing the meal together, they split up and went to their own lessons. Their professors started to pile more work on them to prepare them for their upcoming OWLs, much to the fourth-years' disappointment. Neville, Harry, and Hermione did not catch up with the rest of their friends until dinner, late in the evening. The house elves down at the kitchen were outdid themselves again, this time with rich, delicious, filling stews.

"I feel as if we're going to take the OWLs at the end of this year," whinged Susan, idly scooping up some of her food.

"And us, our NEWTS," added Fred. "I can't believe it's only the first day back at school after our Christmas holidays."

Cedric chuckled. "Just think, we've got an entire term left to go, Fred."

"The Professors are right though, we'll need a lot of practice if we want to get our 'O's." Neville pointed out calmly.

"By the way Ced, will you have enough time to study for your NEWTs?" asked Luna. "You've been spending a lot of time preparing for the Tri-Wizard competition."

He grinned. "Everyone's been a great help. I've been getting the notes for the classes I've missed. Hermione's also compiled a list of books to help me and that's been dead useful. Besides, I'll have about three months to revise and practice after the tournament has ended."

"I don't see why you need to work so hard - you're going to marry into one of the richest families," teased Fred.

Cedric playfully shoved him, ignoring the disapproving look Cho was giving him. Cedric grabbed Fred by the collar and spoke in a voice only loud enough for Fred to hear. "Speak for yourself, Fred." He nudged Fred and gave Susan a meaningful glance.

Fred's eyes grew wide with shock but he kept mum immediately.

"What?" asked Susan curiously, looking at Fred then at Cedric.

He averted his eyes. "Nothing," mumbled Fred, returning his attention to his food.

After dinner, Harry and Hermione decided to return to the Gryffindor common room to hit the books since all of their professors had assigned plenty of work for them to do. As Hermione was pouring over one of her texts, she received a message from Professor McGonagall that she was to see her at once.

"So it's time?" asked Harry, looking at Hermione.

"I believe so." Hermione answered as she packed up her things.

He held her hands and halted her actions.

"Leave it, I'll clean up."

Hermione lifted her head so that their gaze met. She could see unease and reluctance in his eyes. Winding her arms gently around his neck, she kissed him fully on his lips.

Their kiss was brief but sweet. "Please be careful tomorrow – nothing too reckless, okay? I'll see you soon," whispered Hermione when Harry pressed his brow against hers.

He nodded wordlessly and lifted her hands to his lips to kiss them before reluctantly releasing her.

Good night, sweetheart.

She chastely pecked him on the corner of his lips before she left the common room.

With her departure, Harry began his final countdown to the next task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament.

It was the longest night Harry had ever had. He was so used to her comforting presence that he felt strangely incomplete without her.

No thoughts, nothing at all.

He tossed and turned in his seemingly gigantic bed the entire night and did not catch a single wink.

Time appeared to be going slower than usual. Harry and Cedric couldn't help but be impatient, knowing that their loved ones were being held hostage. At breakfast, no one knew really what to say, sensing that they were not in the mood to chat. Finally, after what felt like eternity, it was only half an hour until the start of the task.

Together, Harry and Cedric made their way out of the castle to the Black Lake. The cold winds stung their cheeks as they quietly strolled to the lake.

The second task was more than a mere test of wit, but it is also endurance and strength. After all, no one in their right mind would go swimming in the Black Lake during winter. He had heard of some Chinese who did precisely that during the winters, citing that swimming in such extreme temperatures was good for one's health. Harry would be more than overjoyed if this task was already over.

Despite the harsh weather, a large crowd had gathered by the Black Lake to cheer on their Champions. The stands that surrounded the dragon enclosure during the first task now stood at the banks, the clear waters of the lake reflecting the excited crowd. A long golden table stood at the edge of the lake and he could see several of the judges sitting there. Professor Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, Ludo Bagman, and Professor McGonagall were already present. Harry inwardly shuddered as he and Cedric walked past the lake and joined the two other champions at the judge's table. He tensely smiled at Bagman when he excitedly flashed two thumbs-up at him.

Harry gaped when he realised that Viktor was only garbed in swimming trunks.

The rest of them had wisely kept on their robes.

"Isn't it really cold?" asked Harry.

"It is far colder from where I come from," explained Viktor easily, stretching. Girls at the stands were squealing excitedly at the sight of Krum's exposed torso. Krum was really quite scrawny for an international Quidditch star.

"Good luck," said Fleur, giving Cedric and Harry a nervous smile. They returned it before moving off to do their warm-ups together.

"Let's warm up," said Harry, looking at Cedric. Both Hogwarts Champions began a series of stretches to warm every muscle on their body as the stands began to fill out.

Harry discarded his footwear and socks when the Champions were asked to get ready. "I'm not going to lose this round to you, Harry. I don't think you can accomplish your task by talking." said Cedric jokingly, trying to lighten up the mood.

For the first time in the day, Harry smiled. "Let's see about that. May the best man win."

Bagman set the four champions by the edge of the lake, ten feet apart from one another. He gave Harry a gentle squeeze around the shoulder when he reached him.

"Reckon you'll be fine?" whispered Bagman. "Well, I can help..."

"I'm great, Mr Bagman." Harry interrupted curtly. "Thank you."

"Well...alright, then." Bagman answered with a forced smile. "Good luck." With that, he returned to the judges' table.

At precisely twelve, Mr. Crouch arrived. He looked even paler and sicklier than the last time Harry had seen him. In a crisp and surprisingly strong voice, he addressed everyone succinctly.

"Welcome to the Second Task. The Champions will have precisely one hour to retrieve the thing that they have lost and time starts now."

The large clock that stood by the judge's table began to tick.

Fleur and Cedric immediately cast bubblehead charms over themselves before diving into the lake with a large splash. Viktor waded into the lake; cast a spell on himself before diving deep into the water. Harry threw a handful of Gillyweed into his mouth and started chomping at a frantic pace as he cast a waterproof and warming spell on his robes.

The furious chewing stopped when he gazed into the murky waters of the Black lake. Harry began to falter. His face was tight with tension as he clenched and unclenched his hands.

Sitting among the rest of the students, the other friends watched on anxiously.

"Bloody hell, I think Harry's afraid," commented Fred, pressing the Omnioculars closer to his eyes.

Harry was like a living stone statue, staring intensely into the clear waters of the lake.

Around him, everyone burst into furious whispers at the sight of Harry's hesitation.

Suddenly, Susan stood up.

"Come on, Harry," muttered Neville under his breath.

She placed the wand on her throat and cast the 'sonorous' spell. "Harry James Potter! Just Jump! Hermione's waiting for you! If you have to do it with your eyes closed, so be it!"

Harry, who was in a midst of an intense emotional battle, was startled. He flashed a silly grin at Susan. He closed his eyes and placed his two hands together in a diving posture. When the gills appeared below his ears, he gracefully plunged into the lake.

He felt his body smoothly slicing through the surface of the water. Instead of feeling cold, it was strangely comfortable.

Experimentally, he took his first gulp of water and it felt like the breath of life. He took another gulp of water and felt it pass through his gills, sending oxygen into his brain. With each second he spent in the water, the fear that was incapacitating him faded.

Finally, Harry opened his eyes and looked around. There was a murky green glow around him and he was all alone. He stretched his hands out in front of him and realised that they had become webbed.

He twisted around the water and stared at his feet - they had transformed into flippers. Harry realised that he did not need to blink - he could see everything in the water clearly.

He did several strange twists in the water, almost like a celebratory dance before diving deeper into the lake, in search of Hermione. The spells he had casted aided him effectively - the robes felt weightless since it did not absorb any of the water.

He had read up on the Mer-people the night before and knew that they settled in the dark abyss of the lakes. He sped through the water, keeping clear of the water weeds that were tangled dangerously at the lake bottom. He remembered the warning that Uncle Moony had once given in his class when he was teaching them about Grindylows, water demons that preyed on the unsuspecting swimmers.

"Keep away from weeds; Grindylows tend to hide in them."

He admired the watery landscape as he sped across them. There were wide plains of mud, glittering with pebbles and stones of all sizes, small coves that fishes could hide in, forests of tangled black weeds.

He swam past vast expanses of mud for a long while. The absence of the other champions made him doubt himself.

He stopped and looked around.

Was he heading to the right direction? He had already lost a bit of time due to his fear and he could not afford to lose anymore. Hermione was counting on him to save her and he didn't want to cheat.

What other choice did he have?

Anxious, he continued in the direction he was going.

He nearly heaved a sigh of relief when he heard snatches of haunting mer-song.

"An hour you'll have to look

And to recover what we took..."

Harry increased his speed and soon saw a large rock emerging out of the muddy water ahead. Upon closer inspection, he realised that it had paintings of mer-people chasing the giant squid with spears. Harry swam past the rock and followed the mer-song.

"... Your time's seeping, so tarry not

Lest what you seek stays here to rot..."

Harry soon spotted a small settlement of sorts - a cluster of stone dwellings stained with algae. Harry saw faces as he swam past the houses. The Mer-people had greyish skins and long wild green hair. Their eyes were a bright yellow - just like their broken teeth, and they wore necklaces of bright pebbles around their necks. They leered at Harry as he swam past. Several of them emerged from their dwellings; their strong silver fishtails propelling them in any direction they wished. Harry noticed that they all carried spears like the paintings he saw.

He kept on high alert, afraid that they would attack him suddenly with those spears.

Harry swam on, taking in the sight of the elusive underwater village.

He realised that the place was set on the muddy plains of Black Lake and it seemed almost boundless.

The timid faces of young mer-children at the windows of their huts made Harry feel like an alien. He was different and strange here.

There were patches of black weeds by most of the houses and he even saw a pet Grindylow tied to a stake outside the hut. A crowd of mer-people soon gathered, pointing to his webbed limbs and whispering among themselves. He caught snatches of their conversation and realised that they were discussing what kind of strange fish he was.

So they've never seen a human before, thought Harry, swimming deeper into the village. He reasoned that the hostages should be guarded in the middle of the village where it would be difficult to penetrate. He was shocked when he easily got into a mer-version of a village square. A choir of mer-people stood in the middle, singing in their eerie voices, calling the champions towards them. A large crude statue of a mer-person erected right behind them and he spotted four captives bounded tightly to them.

His jaws nearly touched the ground when he gazed at the four sleeping figures.

A figure merely less than half of the size of the other hostages was firmly tied to the tail of the statue. Her large white wings were tucked neatly at the sight and small bubbles seemed to be issuing from her nostril under her smooth feathers.

Harry was completely outraged. What blaze were they doing tying his Hedwig underwater?

Hedwig was tied between Daphne and Hermione. There was also a girl who looked no older than eight; whose clouds of silvery hair made Harry guess that she was Fleur's sister. The three other humans appeared to be in deep slumber, their heads lolling onto their shoulders and the fine streams of bubble escaping from their mouths.

When his anger finally subsided, he was bemused. Why did he have two hostages?

He absently ran his webbed hand through his cloud of raven hair.

He didn't have too much time to think.

He clumsily held the wand with his webbed hand and cast a weak severing charm at the thick weeds holding Hedwig hostage and immediately grabbed her. Harry enlarged one of his pockets of his robe so that it was large enough to hold Hedwig comfortably. He turned to face Hermione, determined to free her. Harry cast a waterproof and warming spell on the robes that she was wearing.

"Your task is to retrieve your own friend... leave the others..."

"She's my wife!" Harry yelled. The mer-men appeared to not take Harry seriously and laughed at him. He turned his wand at Hermione again and they lunged. When they tried to grab him, he shrugged them off and cast the severing spell at Hermione's ropes. She was soon floating freely and Harry seized her effortlessly around her waist.

Several Mermen sped towards him with their spears and Harry dropped Hermione to dodge the attack. He realised that he wasn't as flexible in water than land. The sight of the mermen pointing excitedly over his head distracted him for a moment. Harry looked up and saw Cedric swimming towards them. His features looked oddly wide and stretched.

"Viktor is coming. I'm not too sure about Fleur."

He made use of their distraction to have a good hold of Hermione. Her head lolled around shoulders before falling on his chest.

There was only one hostage left. He checked his watch and realised that forty-five minutes had already past. Should he leave the only hostage behind?

A glance at the pale looking eight-year old girl helped him made his mind immediately.

"Take Daphne first," said Harry, winding his arm around Hermione in a firm grip as he swam over to the eight year-old girl. He had to fire a few spells to scare the Mermen away. He severed the ropes of the hostage in a practiced move and grabbed her with the other arm, despite the protests of the Mermen. When they tried to attack them with their wicked looking spears again, Cedric immediately pointed his wand at them. He was holding Daphne close to him.

"Don't come any closer."

Their yellow eyes widened in fear at the sight of it.

"I'll cover you. Bring them up," said Cedric, keeping his eyes trained on the large group of them. Harry shot a worried glance at Cedric, hoping that he knew some effective offensive underwater spells. Seeing the determination in Cedric's eyes, Harry retracted his wand back into its holster.

The mer-people scattered suddenly when a monstrous thing sliced through the water. It looked like a human body in swimming trunks with the head of the shark.

Upon closer inspection, Harry realised it was Viktor. He had transfigured himself into a shark, albeit really badly.

He paused and stared at Harry holding two hostages.

"We don't have much time. Take one of them and swim upwards before they come back," said Harry. Viktor did as he was told - hastily grabbed the hostage closest to him and began swimming upwards. He was joined by Harry and Cedric who had an easier time catching up with just one hostage. Their constant morning training made their muscles more use to this kind of strenuous activities.

The mer-people gave chase for a while but gave up when they felt it was too late. The three guys glanced at one another as they made their way up to the surface, feeling as if camaraderie had been forged between them. The fact that they were from different schools didn't matter, all it mattered was that they were working towards something together.

Their heads soon broke through the surface and they took their first gulp of air. The crowd burst into a loud applause at the sight of rest of the champions and their hostages. Everyone seemed to be on their feet, making a lot of noises. To the surprise of the Champions, the hostages stirred and opened their eyes. The girl that Harry was holding looked very frightened and confused.

Harry basked in that comforting mental presence of his wife in his mind. Welcome back.

Hermione smiled at him. You did it.

Harry returned the smile. Sue helped me a bit.

Assured that Hermione was fine, he turned to reassure the girl.

"You'll see your sister soon," said Harry in fluent French.

She nodded, looking at him curiously.

He turned to look at his wife when he felt her disbelief.

"Why are you holding me?" Hermione asked in shock, eyeing Viktor. He had transfigured his head back. She turned to regard Harry and the young girl before averting her eyes. Hermione looked slightly confused that he was not the one who saved her.

"I'll explain when we are dry," said Viktor, glancing at Harry meaningfully.

"Get Madam Pomfrey to check you over first," said Harry, looking at Hermione anxiously. She looked too pale for his liking.

They swam closer to the shore, where Madam Pomfrey and some of the judges were waiting distraughtly for them. Harry assisted the rest of them to get back on the shore as he waited for the effect of the gillyweed to fade. Fleur fought the people who tried to hold her back and dashed to the edge of the water in frantic search of her younger sister. Her robes were torn at many places and she looked as if she had just participated in a brawl.

"Gabrielle! Gabrielle! Is she alive? Is she hurt?"

Relief was written all over her features when she finally saw her younger sister. With little regard for her own health, she pulled her younger sister out of the cold water into her arms.

Madame Pomfrey bundled each of them with large blankets and forced them to drink a potion. They regained their colour immediately after consuming the potion.

Harry turned his attention to his wife.

Hermione looked more relaxed after Krum spoke to her at length.

So he just took the person closest to him? Hermione asked through their mind-link. Did you think that Professor McGonagall would let anything happen to us?

One can't be too sure after what happened with the dragons. Anyway, under those circumstances, it would be quite difficult to swim upwards holding two girls.

I guess this means you should do more strength training since you couldn't manage that feat. Hermione teased.

Harry smiled. I guess so.

When he felt the gills at the side of his necks disappearing, he swam back to the shore. He easily climbed out of the lake as if he had just come out from a refreshing swim.

"Good grief!" shouted Harry when he felt one of his pockets move. He hastily took Hedwig out of his pocket, much to the shock of the onlookers.

"Are you alright?" asked Harry worriedly as he checked his familiar for any injuries. His snowy owl was stunned when she first opened her large amber eyes.

Argh! Why am I wet?

She tried to fly but she realised her feathers were too wet.

Harry gently set her on his forearm and hurriedly began drying his pet owl. Madam Pomfrey draped a thick warm blanket around him as he tended to Hedwig. She stretched out her large wings in irritation and waited for Harry to dry them.

"Relax, Hedwig. I'm trying to dry you as fast as I can."

The students at the stands began to talk.

Hermione immediately walked over to help him with the painful task of drying all of Hedwig's feathers. They had to separate her feathers and dried them one by one with a quick drying spell. Hedwig refused to allow anyone else to assist in the task. Even Madam Pomfrey was flabbergasted at the sight of the snowy owl.

"I think I should ask Professor Hagrid to attend to your owl," said Madam Pomfrey, after handing Harry the goblet of potion. Harry dutifully drank it. Steam gushed out of his ears instantly and he felt all better.

Cedric, Daphne, and Viktor exchanged looks.

"Wait, if Hedwig was your hostage. Then Hermione must be ..."said Daphne as she stared at Viktor. He looked equally surprised from the revelation.

Viktor looked uncomfortable at the idea.

"I thought Herm- own ninny was Harry's. I thought they forgot about mine." Viktor sounded so genuinely surprised and embarrassed that Harry didn't doubt him. Harry nervously lifted his head to meet Hermione's gaze.

She had stopped drying Hedwig.

Her eyes had widened in shock when the truth finally dawned upon her.

"So I was Viktor's hostage?" asked Hermione.

Viktor swallowed visibly. "That would be the case."

Hermione was rendered completely speechless. "W-why?" said Hermione. I'm not more important than Hedwig?

Harry was conscious of the way Hedwig seemed to be suppressing her smugness that she was more important than her mistress.

Harry swallowed visibly when he sensed Hermione's mild irritation.

"Harry, could I speak to you for a second?" asked Fleur, looking hopefully at Harry. She was unusually polite and humble.

Harry looked uncertainly at Hermione before turning to look at Fleur. "Um... can I speak to you later?"

"Oh." Fleur looked crestfallen at his rejection.

"Just go ahead and speak to her. It must be something important," urged Hermione. "I need to find out who selected the hostages." She muttered. "Hedwig more important..."

Harry drew his hand through his wet hair absently, casting another hesitant look at Hermione. After debating inwardly for a while, he relented. "Would you take care of Hedwig for a while? I'll be right back."

Hedwig hopped onto Hermione's offered forearm. He hesitated a while before following Fleur to the edge of the lake.

With her large head cocked slightly, Hedwig was eyeing at something hidden neatly in Hermione's hair. She curiously prodded with her beak and watched it scuttle a short distance before stopping again.

"It's really not Harry's fault," said Viktor suddenly, cursing himself inwardly for opening his mouth. Hermione was looking at him with great interest and waiting for him to explain. Viktor merely scratched his head furiously but did not proceed to explain.

"You're the person he'd sorely miss," interrupted Daphne factually. "Viktor did say he would stop pursuing you but you can't stop liking a person instantly."

Viktor averted his eyes and blushed.

There is a strange beetle on your hair, commented Hedwig as she prodded the small black beetle again. It doesn't smell like one. In fact it smells and acts like a two-legged.

Hermione arched her eyebrow in bafflement. Two-legged?

"It doesn't make any sense. Harry and Hermione are a couple." Cedric said, frowning.

Yes and it behaves stupidly like a two-legged. It didn't run away from me, said Hedwig, leaning forward to play with the unfortunate beetle.

"It doesn't matter. The person they take must be important to the Champion. Do you have anyone else, currently in Hogwarts, whom you'll sorely miss besides Hermione?" asked Daphne, looking at Viktor.

It might be an Animagus. Can you catch it without hurting it?

Hedwig swiftly hopped to her shoulder, swooped, and trapped it within her powerful beak before hopping back to her forearm.

It's done. You owe me a treat. This beetle tastes horrible.

The Bulgarian seeker faltered slightly. "Well, what about my Firebolt?" said Viktor finally.

Daphne rolled her eyes while Hermione smiled in amusement. She started stroking the smooth feathers above her nostrils as Hedwig leaned into her touch.

Viktor gave a sigh of relief that Hermione was not angry at him.

"Well, I pity Su and the rest. After all, they've been outclass by an owl. They are not as important as Hedwig to Harry. If I were a Champion, my hostage would probably be Katrina."

"Hey!" protested Cedric as he stared at his girlfriend.

Daphne appeared to be indifferent. "Well, I would be lying if I'd told you that you're more important than Katrina or Callan."

"Ouch," said Viktor, looking empathetically at Cedric, patting his back.

Fleur led him away from the rest of his friends to the edge of the lake. It was far enough for others to watch them but not eavesdrop into their conversation. Harry could see Mr. Crouch leaning near to the lake, conversing with a particularly wild and ferocious-looking female with long green hair. The Chief Mer-person was recollecting the events that took place underwater.

"'Arry," said Fleur finally, getting his attention. She appeared to be a bit coy. "Gabrielle wasn't your 'ostage and she's very important to me. Thank you for saving 'er."

"You're welcome..."

Taking him by surprise, she leaned in and kissed him sweetly on his lips. Harry was astonished by the innocence and brevity of it since Fleur had never made any attempt to hide her desire to pursue him. He stared at her, wide-eyed as she drew away. He glanced in the direction of Hermione and realised that she was too busy speaking to Hedwig and their friends to notice.

"Zat was purely out of gratitude. No romantic feelings."

Harry smiled. "I can tell. The person you have to convince is Hermione."

She gave Hermione a perfunctory glance before lifting her hands up in surrender. "I give up. 'Ermione 'as you eating from 'er 'and," laughed Fleur, smiling.

Harry shrugged nonchalantly.

"If you ever need any'zing, all you 'ave to do is ask, 'Arry, and ze Delacours will do everyzing we can." Fleur promised gravely.

"Thanks." Harry said. "How about you stop chasing after me?" teased Harry as they fell into step as they strolled back to join their friends. From a distance, he could see Hagrid speaking to Hermione. He could feel Hedwig's annoyance as he checked her.

"Now, zat I'll 'ave to try my best. No promises." Fleur responded in mock-gravity. At Harry's quizzical glance, Fleur could no longer keep a straight face and burst out laughing. As they chatted, Harry discovered that Gabrielle, Fleur's sister, was actually ten years old.

To Harry's immense relief, Hagrid gave Hedwig a clean bill of health after a thorough check. He heartily slapped Harry's back before returning to the stands. Moments after Hagrid left, the judges finally made their announcement. Barty Crouch stood up to address the crowd.

"Good afternoon. In scoring this task, the judges have considered the input of the Merchief Murcus and have come to a decision. Each Champion will be awarded marks out of fifty. Miss Fleur Delacour demonstrated excellent use of the Bubble-head charm, but was attacked by Grindylows, rendering her unable to complete her task. We have decided to award her twenty-five points."

The crowds cheered loudly and Fleur graciously bowed. "Merci!"

When the applause subsided, Mr. Crouch continued in his sombre voice.

"Next, we have all other three champions returning with all four hostages a minute short of an hour. Mr. Cedric Diggory had also used the Bubble-head charm, Lord Potter, the Gillyweed, and Mr. Viktor Krum, an incomplete human transfiguration. These three champions worked together to save all four hostages. As you may or may not know, the primary reason Tri-wizard Tournament was first established was to foster stronger friendships between the schools of different nations. As such, the judges have decided to award all of them full marks for their great teamwork..."

The crowds grew wild at the results, standing up and making so much noise that they could not hear Mr. Crouch any longer.

Full-marks? Harry couldn't believe his ears. They had awarded full marks to them! Harry, Viktor, and Cedric heartily congratulated each other for the remarkable feat. Together, the three champions bowed.

Mr. Crouch raised his hand and the cheering subsided immediately. "Here are the standings: in first place, is Harry Potter. Tied for second place, is Cedric Diggory and Viktor Krum. And finally, in fourth place, is Fleur Delacour. The third and final task will begin on 25th of March at dusk. The champions will be notified of the specifics a month prior to the task itself. Good day."

There was a loud ovation. Harry could hear the Gryffindors cheering wildly at his victory. The hostages and the champions spoke to one another briefly. After a while, the crowd at the stands began to dissipate.

"I'll see you around, 'Arry, 'Ermione." Fleur called, smiling at them. She waved at the rest before she joined her sister and headed back to their carriages.

"Well done, Harry, Cedric, and Viktor!" said Susan bolting down from the stands to them. "I was worried that Harry wasn't going to be able carry out his task."

"Thanks for the wake-up call," said Harry, scratching his head sheepishly.

Seeing the puzzled look on most of the hostages and champions' faces, Neville explained, "Harry was completely frozen until Sue reminded him that Hermione was waiting at the bottom of the lake for him."

"Harry James Potter! Just Jump! Hermione's waiting for you. If you have to do it with your eyes closed, so be it!" mimicked Luna as Susan blushed.

"Oh," said Viktor feeling very guilty when he connected the dots and realised the reason Harry was afraid of getting into the lake. "I'm..."

Before anyone else could speak, Hermione raised up her hand to stop her. "Wait."

To Susan's surprise, Hermione conjured a large glass jar. "Put it inside, Hedwig."

Hedwig opened her beak and dropped the small beetle into the jar and Hermione magically sealed it. The beetle batted furiously against the glass to no avail.

She held the glass jar so that she was on eye-level with the beetle.

"I've charmed the glass to be unbreakable so it's no use trying to break it. We'll find out who you are as soon as we get back to school," spoke Hermione, staring at the beetle. Turning to regard the rest, she spoke, "Aunt Am should be at Hogwarts now to check on you, Harry. We should ask her to join us."

"An animagus?" Harry asked, taking the glass jar from her hands so that he could check out the beetle. The beetle tried to fly around to prevent Harry from taking a closer look at it, but he noticed faint markings around its antennae. "I think you're right. It has really odd markings not usually found on a beetle."

Hermione smiled. "This is definitely an unregistered Animagus. I've got a pretty good idea who she is."

Fred and George exchanged looks with each other.

"How did you managed to find it?" asked Fred, looking awed. He took the glass jar and shook it really hard so that the beetle bounced off the glass walls. It looked rather lightheaded after the shake.

"Oops!" said George when he felt the glass jar slipped past his hands when Fred handed it to him. The glass jar crashed onto the ground and began tumbling down the slope towards the water.

The beetle tried running hysterically in the opposite direction so as to prevent the jar from rolling into the water but it was of no use.

Just before the jar could tumble into the lake, George summoned the glass jar into his hands. The beetle had become absolutely still, as if it had been frightened out of its wits.

"Hedwig found her in my hair. Owls have keener sense of smell than we do."

Viktor was quite in awe of Hedwig. "Vell, let's get going. I want to see if it's really who you think it is."

Susan arranged a meeting with Amelia in a private classroom. Throughout the entire journey, the teenagers took turns tossing the glass jar to each other as if they were playing rugby. Fred was doing the play by play of the game. Occasionally, the guys would tackle the person in possession of the glass jar. George dived and grabbed Cedric's legs when he caught the glass jar, causing him to fall and drop it. Cedric good-naturedly scissored his legs and flipped him so that he was pinning George onto the ground, causing the rest of them to forget about the glass jar.

The two boys grappled on the ground for a while but Cedric turned out to be the winner when he locked George in a hold. "I must beat you in hand-to-hand one day," complained George as he picked himself up. He expelled the wand from his holster and summoned the glass jar.

George was shocked when the glass jar hovered in the air until he realised that his twin brother was pranking him by indiscreetly summoning the jar at the same time.

It started a 'summoning' battle when the teenagers realised that they were pitting their summoning skills against each other. The informal tournament tested their reflexes and their concentration. Occasionally, there would be a clear winner - the glass jar would zoom into the hands of someone. Most of the time, it would end up in a stalemate - the glass jar would only hover in the air.

Several times, the teenagers had dropped it since they all lost their concentration at the same time.

The beetle in the jar looked absolutely ruffled when the teenagers finally met with Amelia.

Amelia and Tonks were already waiting for them in the empty private classroom.

"What took you so long? Sue says you need me my help?" asked Amelia, looking at Hermione curiously.

"Well, Hedwig found this." Hermione explained, summoning the glass jar into her hands and it zoomed out of George's hands. She handed the glass jar to Amelia.

Amelia observed the bug entrapped in the glass jar thoughtfully. "It looks a bit still. Do you know the spell to reveal the beetle's identity?"

Hermione and Harry nodded, training their eyes on the beetle.

"I would imagine I would be still too after what that bug has gone through," said George, laughing.

Amelia looked into the laughing faces of the teenagers present and shook her head. It was clear that the teenagers already have some idea who the person is and didn't like him or her.

"I guess we don't need a stunning spell then. Sue, levitate the beetle out of the glass jar at the count of three. Three, two, one..."

The lid came off and Sue levitated the beetle out of it. Harry, Hermione, and Amelia cast the spell to revert the beetle into its human form. The beetle transformed into heavily-jawed witch with jewelled spectacles.

Her hair and clothes were in disarray. Her jewelled spectacles were knocked askew. Her knees buckled the moment her feet touched the ground and she tumbled. Skeeter looked completely in daze from the treatment she received as a beetle.

The teenagers grinned cheerfully at the sight of her, even Amelia chuckled.

"She's unusually quiet, don't you think?" commented Susan.

"I don't think she'll pay much attention, but I have to go through the formalities." Amelia said, shrugging.

Amelia's tone grew formal. "Ms. Rita Skeeter, you were warned not to enter Hogwarts' grounds lest you be apprehended and charged for trespassing and obstructing of justice. It's also an offense to be an unregistered Animagus, under the law of Animagi, section 3, chapter 4. You're under arrest. Auror Tonks, please take her away."

Tonks flash a large grin.

"This is the easiest suspect I've ever had to transport," commented Tonks as she apparated Skeeter away with her.

"She will be placed on trial for the offences she has committed," said Amelia. "How did you know it was Skeeter?"

"I've been researching magical ways to eavesdrop and Animagi briefly crossed my mind. After all, we wouldn't have paid much attention to her if she turned herself into something common. I gave her a benefit of doubt since her name was not in the list of registered Animagi. However, it was only when Hedwig brought it to my attention that the bug was an Animagus, that everything clicked."

"Way to go, Hermione and Hedwig!" said Susan, ruffling Hedwig's fine feathers vigorously. Hedwig gave an affronted hoot and attacked her fingers.

Susan's constant training gave her the agility to dodge her talons and she immediately backed away.

"What in Merlin's name..."

Hedwig gave Susan another death glare before she started grooming herself thoroughly.

"I'm sorry about that, Sue. Hedwig's quite finicky about her appearance," explained Harry apologetically, offering Hedwig a treat to sweeten her temper. It was very natural for Hedwig to be very short-tempered after the ordeal she had been put through.

"Try 'very'," said Fred, keeping his distance from her. Hedwig lifted her head and eyed him distastefully.

"I'm sorry, Hedwig," offered Susan contritely. Hedwig hooted again, gave Harry's finger an affectionate nip before taking off through the window.

"Please excuse her - she isn't usually that bad tempered. She's been through quite a number of events today," said Harry. "She's not used to being rescued from the lake. The closest she ever had to that was the vigorous cleaning I put her through last year, when I wiped every single feather with a semi-dry cloth."

"They used Hedwig?" demanded Amelia.

"Yes, apparently, they couldn't find a more suitable hostage for Harry," commented Hermione matter-of-factly.

Amelia arched her eyebrows in surprise as she stared at Hermione. "What about you?"

"She was Viktor's," interjected Daphne, ignoring the way Hermione was glaring at her. Viktor quietly backed off, not wishing to be dragged into the conversation.

"Oh." Her brows knitted together into a frown. "I thought that Sue would be Viktor's while Hermione would be Harry's. I mean that would have made better sense."

Astoria and George nodded their heads vigorously while Fred grew very quiet.

"Aunt Am!" protested Susan as she nudged the laughing Daphne at her ribs.

"Well, you don't have so defensive about it," teased Amelia, laughing.

"We're only friends," added Viktor hastily.

"I guess for now at least," added George, smirking. Susan glared at George for that remark.

Luna leaned closer to Fred discreetly and whispered. "You have a chance - Sue wasn't Viktor's hostage."

He cheered up slightly but said nothing.

Taking pity on his good friend, Harry spoke up. "It makes more sense to me too. I was so focused on Hermione that I didn't even notice that Hedwig was missing," admitted Harry sheepishly.

"That reminds me of the question I wanted to ask a while ago. Are we really not as important to you as compared to Hedwig?" asked Susan suddenly, staring at Harry.

Harry drew his hand through his hair absently. "I honestly don't know how they came up with all of this."

"The answer is very obvious, isn't it?" Daphne interjected. "Otherwise, you would've been sleeping in the lake along with us."

It was only evening did Harry and Hermione had a chance to be finally alone together. Hedwig and Crookshanks had decided to spend their time with Callan and Katrina respectively, leaving them all alone in their bedroom. After a nice warm shower, the couple retired to their bed. Hermione was engrossed with another of her thick tome on magic theories.

He drew his hand through his hair haphazardly. "You're not mad at me, are you?" asked Harry, watching Hermione closely for a reaction.

"No."

"Well, it's great that you managed to discover the way Skeeter eavesdrop."

"Hedwig discovered her."

"She didn't know it was Skeeter. You put it together," said Harry. "I honestly thought that I was supposed to save you. I was shell-shock when I saw Hedwig."

She lifted her head from her book, fixing her eyes curiously on him.

"I only knew that I had to rescue you from the bottom of the lake. That was enough to motivate me to overcome my own fear and take the plunge."

She reached over to caress his cheeks gently, ignoring the large book on her lap.

Harry was spellbound by the smothering look in her eyes.

"Silly man, why would I be jealous of Hedwig? She's important to me too. Thank you for thinking of me first, though." He was mildly distracted by her faint scent of vanilla as she drew closer to him. Their lips osculated in a gentle kiss that stirred their souls. They held nothing back from each other.

For the moment, nothing else mattered for them and all they knew was the love they shared for each other.

Many miles away from Hogwarts, a large snake was resting near a large arm chair in a small dimly-lit room. A fire was built in the fireplace to keep the chill and dampness away.

Nagini lifted her head from the rug and hissed when Wormtail hurried into the room.

"It's alright, Nagini," the cold voice drawled.

Wormtail was breathless and pink from exhaustion.

"M-my Lord, w-we've a problem. P-potter enjoys far too much support in school to be touched. He has had Lady Bones at Hogwarts to keep watch over him after he was named a Champion," said Wormtail.

"Did he pass his second task?"

"Yes, my Lord. He's in first place. He worked with the other champions to save the other hostages."

Lord Voldemort chuckled. "Something I'd expect from a naive boy like him. Great, everything is going according to plan..."

"It'll be difficult to get him alone with such a tight circle of friends..."

There was silence in the room.

"Do you doubt me, Wormtail?"

Wormtail trembled in fear as he kowtowed before him. "N-no m-my L-lord, I-I wouldn't dare."

"Good. Now be patient, Wormtail. He will lose that support in due time," said Lord Voldemort coolly. "I know about the pact the Ancient Families have with each other. The pact had once incapacitated them and it will continue once we set our plan in motion. He will be vulnerable. Do not mess this up."

The way his words were uttered sent chills down Wormtail's spine.

"Yes, my lord," said Wormtail, bowing low, grateful that his master did not punish him. Even in his weakened state, Lord Voldemort was still powerful enough to hurt him.

With that, the Dark Lord dismissed Wormtail and sent him on his way.

At Hogwarts, the days after the second task were rather chaotic for Harry and his friends. Once again, they were thrown into limelight. The fact that Harry and Viktor seemed to fight a duel for her just weeks before, in addition to Hermione being the thing Viktor would miss most had fuelled the students to believe Skeeter's outlandish

stories. Most of their other friends also bugged them for details about the second task.

When Daphne was questioned about the happenings underwater, she merely arched one of her eyebrow sardonically and said, "I was asleep." It was a response most worthy of the Ice queen and her other friends couldn't help but be amused by it.

Hedwig apologised to Susan in her own way. It surprised Harry when he saw his proud and fussy owl being very affectionate to Susan.

The second task had a profound impact on the relationships between the champions. It seemed to have brought the four champions together and it was not uncommon to see either Fleur or Viktor joining them occasionally for meals, laughing, and sharing freely.

A few weeks after the second task, everything became relatively peaceful after the excitement had faded away. The gossip soon died down since it was evident that Hermione and Viktor were nothing but friends. Susan and Viktor, on the other hand, were seen mostly together, as if the time Viktor had spent with Harry's friends brought them closer. It was even rumoured that Viktor was going to formally ask Susan out.

Harry was sitting alone at the Gryffindor table, sipping his pumpkin juice when Cho Chang joined him. The rest of his friends were still in their dorms, showering up after an intense workout in the morning. Harry and Hermione had been harsh on them, seeing that their friends had begun to slack off.

"Good morning, it's quite unusual to see you sitting alone," commented Cho with a smile as she slipped into the seat opposite to him. She pulled a plate closer to her and started to fill her plate with a few pieces of toast. As she drew her plate closer to her, she accidentally knocked Harry's goblet of pumpkin juice onto the table.

Harry immediately leapt out of his seat to avoid the spell.

"Oops!" said Cho, hastily righting the fallen goblet.

"It's alright," said Harry, cleaning the spill with a spell.

Cho sheepishly gave him a fresh goblet of pumpkin juice. "I'm sorry."

"No harm done," said Harry, accepting the goblet. "Anyway, Hermione had something to attend to this morning. She'll be here in a bit." Hermione had decided to modify the training schedule after their morning workout.

"Wow, you seem to know her schedule very well," commented Cho. "It's hard to believe that you're only dating."

Harry arched his eyebrows in surprise for a brief second. "Well, it's not very difficult since we share the same timetable." He shrugged.

She gave another heart-stopping smile, "That's quite true."

They soon changed the subject and decided to talk about Quidditch.

Their friends soon joined them at the table for breakfast after a while. The boys looked like a pack of wolves ravaging food when they dug in. Hermione gave them disapproving looks at the way they ate. They broke up for their lessons after the meal.

The fourth year Gryffindors had DADA first thing in the morning. Professor Moody went through offensive spells and demonstrated the use of the spells. As usual, the students took down his every word. The bell rang finally, signalling the end of the class and the students began to pack their things. Harry and Hermione were looking forward to the break so that they could have a head start on their homework.

"Potter," Professor Moody growled, his magical eye swirling to fix on him. "I need to speak to you."

Harry and Hermione exchanged looks.

"I'll be in the common room," said Hermione, pecking him on the cheek before joining Neville.

Professor Moody led him to the adjourning office. Harry warily followed him in.

"Sit, Potter," growled Professor Moody, gesturing to the seat before his desk. "A cup of tea? You'll need it."

Harry nodded and Professor Moody conjured a cup of tea for him.

Harry thanked him politely for the tea. His magical eye swirled to fix on him. Professor Moody looked even more sombre than usual.

"The headmistress has requested that you and your friends stop taking private lessons from me for the time being. One of the damned Heads of the other schools got a wind of it and accused us of giving you and Diggory an edge over the other champions," growled Professor Moody. "They are convinced that this is the reason why you're doing so well. It's in the rules that we're not supposed to lend a hand in the preparation for tasks."

Harry frowned. "The private training has nothing to do with tournament."

"In any case, Professor McGonagall has her hands tied and had no choice but to make this request. However, that doesn't mean that you stop practising. You know that we're entering dangerous times."

"Of course," said Harry in a clipped voice, sipping his tea.

"We'll begin the lessons again after the last task," concluded Professor Moody, looking none too happy.

Harry finished the rest of his tea in a gulp and set the cup on the table. "Yes, Sir. Thank you."

He left the office, barely controlling his temper and turned into an empty corridor. He couldn't believe just how narrow-minded the Heads of the other schools were. He couldn't care less about winning the Tri-wizard Tournament since he didn't enter it in the first place. They needed the lessons to ensure their survival.

Harry blinked in confusion when he realised that his world was spinning.

Suddenly, he stopped and grabbed his head.

A pain that he never knew had radiated from his head. He crouched down, in pain and drew up his mental shields.

His vision soon grew blurry and he found himself blacking out.

The last thing he heard was the sound of footsteps.

A/N: Hey everyone, sorry for the late update. I think the next chapter would take some time before it's ready but I hope you'll have a blessed week. Thanks for reading and reviewing.

Chapter 38

"Harry..."

He felt someone shaking him lightly and he blearily cracked open one of his eyes. He felt his head pounding. A pretty girl with straight black hair was looking at him worriedly. "Are you alright?" she asked.

He momentarily forgot about the jolt of pain that was radiating from his head and stared at her in a daze. He was transfixed with her almond-shaped brown eyes, entranced by the faint jasmine scent, enthralled by the long silky hair. He must have been blind since he had never thought that she was this pretty. He clutched his head in pain when he tried to remember the reason why he didn't notice her for the past two years.

She bent closer to him, searching his face. "I think you look a bit pale. Do you need the hospital wing?"

He stared into her eyes dumbly for a second before registering her question.

"Um... n-no need, C-Cho, I-I'm fine," stammered Harry, cursing himself inwardly at his temporary loss of speech. He must have looked like an idiot in front of her.

"Okay, do you need help to get up?"

He shook his head and insisted that he was alright. He glanced around and found himself lying on the cold hard floor of the corridor. What exactly happened?

Images of him having a talk with Professor Moody flashed. It made no sense to him since it did not explained the cause of him collapsing.

Doubt flickered in those eyes that he admired a while ago. "Harry?"

"Thanks, but I'm great." He cautiously got onto his feet, swaying precariously like a toddler taking his first steps. He felt Cho grabbing his arm to steady him when he lost his footing.

His cheeks pinked at the physical contact but he flashed a grateful smile at her. His heart skipped a beat when Cho returned the smile.

"So what happened? I was heading towards my next class when I saw you lying here," asked Cho worriedly. "Were you heading to your common room?"

He made a face. "I don't know," answered Harry, as he desperately tried to recall. It was the truth as far as he could tell. "All I remembered was that I had finished speaking to Professor Moody." He remembered the conversation. He was going to stop taking private lessons from Professor Moody because the Heads of the other schools were complaining that it was against the rules. He gave another scowl. He remembered that he was heading back to the Gryffindor tower. "Yes, I think I was -I'm having my break now."

Cho did not let go of his arm as she led him to the Gryffindor tower. Harry couldn't believe that the stunning Quidditch Captain would even pay so much attention to him. He wordlessly followed Cho, overjoyed to let her lead him away. He was so spellbound with her that he did not notice that Cho had finally led him to the entrance of the Gryffindor common room. Harry absently gave the password when he saw the Fat Lady and entered the room. Bushy brown hair blocked his vision as he felt someone wrapping her arms around him in a bone-crushing embrace. "Where have you been Harry? I was so worried."

He stiffened.

"Who are you?" he demanded, he pushing the girl away.

The girl scrunched her face into a frown of bafflement as she let her arms dropped to her side. "Who are you?" echoed the girl as she stared at him, stricken. "I'm Hermione, Harry. Surely you know that?"

"Am I supposed to know you?" He asked coolly.

There were collective sounds of gasping from the other students behind her. He didn't recognise any of them but he knew that they were from other houses.

A tall, good-looking Hufflepuff strode forward with a menacing determination that caused Harry to back off. "You can't be kidding?"

"No, I'm not. I don't know any of you." He turned to look at Cho, as if hoping that Cho would shed some light on their identities. She appeared to be as shocked as some of the girls.

He searched the faces of those students and noticed that they were staring at him intently, especially the girl who tried to hug him. There was just something disconcerting about hers that he could not put a finger on.

"They are your friends, Harry. The girl before you is Hermione, your girlfriend."

"My girlfriend, Hermione?" Harry echoed, staring at the witch before him. She causally brushed a stray offending fringe off her forehead and nodded calmly. He noticed a gold Celtic ring resting on her fingers. Looking at his own hand, he noticed a similar one and Harry had no clue how he got it.

She's really my girlfriend?

He lifted his head in response and drank in the sight of her- she was exquisite. How in Merlin's name did he get a girlfriend like that?

Her eyes reflected worry as they scanned him anxiously.

"Are you feeling okay?" asked Hermione tenderly. A look of sincere relief appeared on her face as if she was glad that he was not hurt.

He was quite taken aback by her show of genuine concern.

"Yes," lied Harry, ignored his hammering headache and averted his eyes. He rubbed his head self-consciously. It was disconcerting that

she appeared to know him better than himself. He could tell that she wasn't convinced at her but she did not press on the issue.

"Harry," asked Hermione gently. "Do you recognise anyone in this room besides Cho?"

Logic had reminded him that he shouldn't trust a person whom he barely knew for a few minutes but he rejected that thought- she appeared as if she was sincere.

Dazed, he glanced around the room and started to list down the names of the housemates he saw. Hermione had encouraged him to go on with nods until he had mentioned the name of every Gryffindor present in the room, with the exception of her and the pair of red-headed twins.

The rest of the group appeared to be perplexed that he did not mention them.

"Is that all?" asked Hermione.

Harry gave a non-committed nod.

"He doesn't remember us?" asked the red-headed girl in outrage. "We should get him checked by Madam Pomfrey."

"Sue," reproved Hermione, glancing at her.

The red-headed sulked but kept her silence.

"No, thank you. I'm feeling quite fine. I don't have an arm that needs re-growing," rebuked Harry frigidly, recalling his unpleasant visits to the Hospital Wing.

Hermione was lost in her own thoughts.

The way Hermione bit her lips as she pondered things through was decidedly adorable to him. He found himself entranced by the action, instinctively reaching out to sooth those abused lips when he caught himself. He reminded himself that he barely knew her.

"Which house do you belong in?"

He arched his eyebrows in surprise. "Gryffindor."

"What did you face in your first task?"

"Hungarian Horntail."

"What colour are Unicorns when they are foals?"

"Gold."

"Do you remember where do you sleep in?"

Harry appeared to be affronted. "Of course I do, I stay in a separate quarter, alone." He added that for good measure.

There was a tensed silence.

"Cho, don't you have lessons in five minutes? You need to hurry lest you'll be late," said the good-looking Hufflepuff finally, taking things into his hand.

Harry frowned, not wishing that she would leave so soon. She was his life buoyant in this insane situation.

Cho departed from the common room, leaving him in their hands.

The thought of being alone with them frightened him. He was ready to take flight when he noticed the pain in her eyes. An undesirable need to reach out and comfort her shot through him but he resisted it. Quietly, he watched Hermione turned away.

"Harry..." A Gryffindor with round face and brown hair spoke. He looked as if he was of his age.

"I don't see a need to speak to any of you," interrupted Harry, wincing inwardly at his harsh tone. He averted his eyes. "I don't know any of you."

"Well, that's alright. I'm Luna Lovegood," said a dreamily looking girl with a toothy smile. "Strangers are friends that you haven't met." She caught him by surprise by grasping his hand in a firm handshake. Taking his shell-shock silence as an approval, she continued with a round of introductions.

Harry sensed their hesitation as they acknowledged with awkward nods or waves.

His eyes flickered in interest when he was introduced to Susan Bones and Daphne Greengrass. Did he actually know the two heirs of the Ancient Houses?

"Harry needs to see Madam Pomfrey," interrupted Hermione finally, turning to look at him. Her eyes flashed with resolve. "We can talk later." A hint of steel entered her voice and he was surprised to see that no one dared to question her.

"I..."

He found himself at the end of her stern glare and wisely kept quiet.

"We'll be here," said Luna chirpily, making herself comfortable in one of the armchairs.

"Let's make a move first," said Hermione, staring pointedly at him. The rest of her friends were still watching him closely as they walked away.

Harry was annoyed that he had to go to the hospital wing when he felt almost fine. The school matron was surprised to see them. She led Harry to the usual bed.

"I thought you've gotten out of the habit of getting injured. Let me have a look at you," said Madam Pomfrey. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," said Harry. When he saw the brows of Hermione drawing into a line, he quickly amended, "Well, except for a headache."

"I'm going to use diagnostic spells," said Madam Pomfrey, drawing the curtains around his bed.

Harry's face pinked a little when he realised that Hermione was still sitting by his bed, without the intention of moving away.

"Hermione, would you please give me a bit of privacy?" pleaded Harry.

Madam Pomfrey shot a curious look at Hermione.

"He doesn't remember me," explained Hermione, looking at her.

She nodded and closed the curtains after Hermione.

The common room was dead quiet. All of the Gryffindors had left, sensing their dark moods. George and Fred sat uncharacteristically still at the crouch, watching the flickering flames of the fireplace. They decided to stay put and wait for Hermione's call. No one really knew what to say, not even Luna.

Cedric drew his hand through his hair for the umpteenth times before finally bursting out impatiently, "How could this even happen?" His question echoed eerily in the room and wasn't met with an answer.

Daphne placed her hand on his arm in a feeble attempt to calm her boyfriend.

"Should we speak to Aunt Amelia regarding this?" asked Neville quietly. "They may have a solution..."

"Even Hermione has never even heard of such amnesia at all," Susan pointed out. "I doubt Aunt and Uncle Os would even have a solution to it."

"Are you suggesting that we do nothing at all?" asked Fred, drumming his fingers on the arm of the couch.

"We need Harry to trust Hermione first before we can do anything," said Luna quietly, capturing the attention of all her friends. Her voice

had lost all the usual trace of dreaminess and she was as sombre as the rest.

"I second that. If Harry doesn't remember Hermione, he won't remember Aunt Am or my father. He may even feel provoked to react. It's best if we assess the situation," added Daphne, calmly.

The Weasley twins stood up suddenly.

"Where are you going?" asked Susan impatiently.

"Didn't Harry last spoke to Professor Moody? We could check with him."

"Do you think he's responsible for Harry's plight?" asked Susan.

"It's a good place to start."

Hermione had finished communications with Aunt Amelia when she heard the sound of the curtains draw. She felt more assured that Aunt Amelia was looking into the strange situation of Harry's.

"As far as I can tell, besides the throbbing headache, he's fine," answered Madame Pomfrey, mildly baffled. "There are no traces of potion in him or spell residing on his skin that may caused his condition." She glanced at Hermione. "Do you know what happened to him, Lady Gryffindor?"

"According to one of my friends, she found him unconscious-he had passed out along the corridors. When he regained his consciousness, he couldn't recognise me or any of our close friends. With more questionings, I realised that he could remember everything except the people close to him."

Madam Pomfrey grew thoughtful.

"It's a strange condition." Turning to look at Harry, she asked, "When you did first meet Hermione?"

"In the common room just now," answered Harry honestly.

Madam Pomfrey nodded and began her line of questioning. At the end of the questioning, she came to the same condition as Hermione. She took out her wand and re-checked for physical injuries on the head.

"It could be a spell or a potion that created this strange amnesia. He has no injuries on his head. I need to do more intense diagnostic tests. We might be lucky."

The eyes of Harry widened open at the mention of a longer stay.

On their way to meet Professor Moody, the Weasley twins met with Amelia. They spoke with Professor Moody. There was no trace of potions in the tea or any trace of an unidentified spell from his wand.

They retreated to Professor Dumbledore's office to talk about it.

"I don't see it as a spell- Harry's very alert to it," said Amelia. She had sent Professor Dumbledore to speak to the other Professors about it.

"Harry had breakfast before that lesson. Someone might have poured the potion into his goblet when he wasn't looking," said George.

"If that's the case, it could be anyone," said Fred.

Amelia frowned. "You're right," said Amelia. "It could be someone close too."

Fred and George looked at each other, with an uncomfortable expression on their faces.

"Waltzing angel," she said absently and the granite lion between the two stairs leapt away, revealing a gloomy narrow area with winding stairs. It was quite late in the afternoon when Madam Pomfrey finished her tests and found nothing. She had recommended bringing him to St Mungo's for diagnosis and they refused since the chance that they might find a trace of a potion or spell in his system was close to nil. It was almost impossible to produce a cure without knowledge of the cause of his condition.

"How did you know?" he spluttered, gaping at her.

"I was there when you set the password," she said briskly, averting her eyes. As if she wanted to avoid more questions, she hurried up the stairs, leaving Harry to run after her. When he finally reached the private quarters, he was shocked that Hermione was moving around the sitting place with great familiarity.

There were two goblet of pumpkin juice on the coffee table.

"If you have questions, it's best if you sit down," said Hermione, gesturing to the armchair opposite of hers.

He frowned, staring at her incredulously.

A striking snowy owl flew in from the window and landed gracefully on his shoulder. She was completely without any spotting-highly unusual for her species. The owl gave him an affectionate nip as she fixed her large, unusually expressive eyes on him. She was acting with so much familiarity with him, he was certain that she must be his pet. The owl cocked her head slightly so that she was staring at Hermione. Harry had a feeling that they were engaged in a conversation.

Suddenly, the owl swiftly turned her head back and trained her eyes on him.

"No, he isn't angry with you. He just doesn't remember you," said Hermione.

Her eyes appeared to look hopeful and guilt crept into him. He absently scratched the back of his head. "W-well, she's right. I don't remember you."

The owl froze. With wide open eyes, she stared unblinkingly at Harry as if she had been slapped on her face.

Hermione's tone was gentle when she spoke.

"This snowy owl is your familiar, Harry. If you lower your mental shields, you'll know it's true."

He frowned, inwardly battling with himself over the decision.

Sensing no danger, he cautiously lowered his mental shields. He was conscious of the feeling of being whole as a strange connection with another person filled the void in his heart and completed him. He basked in those foreign feelings of joy and relief.

A smile stretched across his lips.

The owl perched on his covered arm so that their gaze could meet. She had gotten over the shock.

How can you not remember me, Harry? I'm Hedwig, you named me. I was your first birthday present!

He instinctively reached out and stroked the fine feathers under her hooked beak. Hedwig cheered up a little, gave a hoot of enjoyment as she leaned into his touch.

"I don't know," said Harry, frowning as he tried to recall. He winced when he felt his head hurt and tried to put the mental shield back on again. Hedwig immediately hopped to safety.

"No, don't do that, Harry," spoke Hermione, with a grimace on her face as if she massaged her head in the exact area he was hurting. "Do you need the potion for your headache?"

He was befuddled. How was it possible?

"It is possible when we share a bond, Harry," said Hermione, giving him a small smile. "I don't know how you endure such pain."

"I don't understand anything," said Harry finally, sinking into an armchair. He took the goblet of pumpkin juice and sipped from it. It was a feeling that he wasn't used to. She could read his thoughts and feel his emotions? That kind of bareness unnerved him immensely. Yet, at the same time, there was this disconcerting hint of relief.

"Some say that knowing what you don't know leads to wisdom," quipped Hermione in a light-hearted tone. She nervously cleared her voice when she realised that he wasn't laughing. "I don't really understand much too. We could help each other out. I'm not too sure what have exactly gone awry. I have a theory though."

"You think that I have a peculiar amnesia, a condition in which I lost my memories of the people I care. You can't be serious, I've never heard of anything like that," rebuked Harry, climbing onto his feet so that he could pace around the room.

He sensed her disappointment.

"That isn't so important right now if you're right," he amended quickly, turning back to look at her. He was relieved when he saw her smile.

"Alright, so is there something you would like to know?" asked Hermione, crossing her long shapely legs together.

"Who are you?" asked Harry, staring at her intently. "Why did Madam Pomfrey called you Lady Gryffindor?" Why did she affect him so?

Her brows rose at his question.

"I guess that's quite a fair question to ask. I'm Hermione Jane Granger nee Potter or Lady Gryffindor, your wife. We've been happily married for more than a year now and we are soul-mates in the truest sense."

Vivid images of him decked out neatly in a 'black tie' tuxedo with a large serene smile on his face flashed in his head. It was clear that it was just a simple ceremony. Love was plainly reflected in his eyes as he stood regally before the aged Headmaster. The timeless words spoken by the facilitator of the wedding echoed distantly in the background as the mind's eye fixed itself solely on him. He saw himself taking the smaller wedding ring from the box.

His vows to her resounded firmly.

"Hermione, I can't promise that I won't ever disappoint or hurt you in the future but know that I will always love you. I give you this ring as a constant and visible reminder of my love for you and I'll always be there forever and a day."

Harry felt an explainable surge of bliss as he watched himself slipping the smaller ring into her fourth finger.

Harry collapsed into his seat as if his legs could not support him.

No, it was impossible.

He impulsively felt his left hand for the evidence of the marriage and found it. The simple gold wedding band became visible when he touched it.

"Was that your memory of our wedding?" asked Harry impassively, averting his eyes and staring at the gold band nestled on his fourth finger.

"Yes, we share a mind and an emotional link with each other." She tenderly touched his thigh.

He cringed slightly and she withdrew her hand.

"I don't know what to say," said Harry finally, drawing his hand through his hair absently. He kept his gaze firmly on his hands as if they were the most fascinating thing in the world. "Just fifteen minutes ago, I'm convinced that I've never met you and now I realise that you're my wife. It's all too mind-boggling. I need time to think."

He felt her hand grasping his gently. Her touch comforted him and calmed the emotional storm in him. It was a pleasantly bizarre feeling that felt disconcerting familiar.

He lifted his head so that their gaze would meet. Hermione's eyes lit with love and determination.

"I'm not going to push you, Harry. If you can't remember anything from the past, it's alright. We can still be together..."

Harry couldn't take it any longer.

"No..."

Raising his mental shields, he leapt out of the seat and summoned his Firebolt. His broom zoomed into the room instantly, as if sensing his urgent need.

He saw a flicker of hurt in her eyes before she carefully assumed an impassive face. He could see her fervent hope in her eyes.

Harry steeled himself and swung his leg over his broomstick.

"I'm sorry but I'll be back," said Harry hastily, surprising himself that he had turned back just to say that. Casting one final look at Hermione, he plastered himself on his broom and sped out of the window.

There was a muffled sort of sound when Hedwig spread her large wings and chased after him.

Harry's speedy departure left Hermione feeling defeated as she sank into the armchair. She closed her eyes and put her head between her knees.

The ginger-coloured cat padded into the common room and stared at the quiet teenagers imploringly with his yellow eyes. He gave an pleading mew as he stood at the entrance of the marriage quarters.

Luna stood up, upon noticing Crookshanks.

Crookshanks promptly disappeared into the entrance.

"Where are you going, Luna?" asked Neville.

"Crookshanks was here. He wants us to be with Hermione."

Harry pressed his body close to the broom as he pulled it into an exhilarating almost-vertical ascent. The rushing wind whipped his hair

and his spirit soared as he climbed higher and higher into the sky. Recklessly, he did several crazy turns on his broom as he zoomed in the air before slowing down to a sudden stop.

It was still quite cold and only the excitement of the ride was keeping him warm.

Hovering mid-air, he mulled over his current situation. His mind could not quite grasp the reality that he was married. Why can't he remember?

Was Hermione correct in her deduction? A condition as particular as the amnesia she was suggesting seemed so out of the world, even for the magical world.

The chill wind whipped his hair wildly.

There was the matter of Hermione.

What was he going to do? He couldn't deny those strange feelings that Hermione seemed to be evoking in him. It was remarkable in a terrifying way. She had a hold on him even though he had barely known her. He recalled the fluttering feeling in his stomach when she smiled at him and the pain when she looked so hurt.

From his brief encounter with Hermione, he knew that she was extraordinary. If Cho was appealing then Hermione was beautiful- there was something about her that was so mesmerising that he was sure he wasn't the only one who noticed it.

So preoccupied by his thoughts, he did not notice where he was heading to until he found himself outside one of the windows of the Gryffindor tower. He was just flying outside the sitting room of the quarters. He dodged out of sight when he heard people entering the room and kept watch.

The gang found Hermione sitting all alone in the sitting room. Crookshanks was sitting on her lap, allowing his troubled mistress to scratch him behind his ears.

"Hi," said Hermione sombrely. Crookshanks gracefully leapt off her lap, seeing that his mistress was in good hands.

Hermione looked as if she needed a good cry- her eyes were slightly red but there were no tears.

Upset, Susan put her arms around her good friend and drew her into a comforting hug. It was soon joined by Luna and Daphne.

"Thanks," mumbled Hermione when the girls move apart.

"Do you want to inform the rest of the family?" Cedric asked gently.

"No, not at this point when he hasn't made his decision."

"He's unlike the Harry that we usually know," commented Cedric quietly. He raked his hand through his short hair. "I-I've never seen him like this. It is difficult to believe that he is the same confident Harry who would stand up against injustice."

"The Harry now knows nothing of love or friendship, it's not surprising," answered Luna. "I believe all he remembers was his unhappy past."

"If he's going to be like that-"said Fred.

"- he'll be fodder for You-Know-who," completed George.

Susan shot them a dirty look but kept her silence.

Hermione was reminded of the first time she saw Harry on the Hogwarts train. She could imagine how guarded and distrustful he would be if he did not know any of them. Hermione grew annoyed at the person who had caused such an alteration in Harry.

"It's probably his doing. I'll make sure he regrets it."

"The Dark Lord? It's a bit unusual for his style to employ such techniques," commented Daphne. "I would expect him to send someone to kill him."

"What should we do about Harry? Is he in jeopardy?"

Hermione frowned in thought.

"Harry may have lost his memories of us but he hasn't lost his ability to protect himself against him. We'll have to keep an eye on him," said Hermione, rubbing her temples. She dashed to the window suddenly, and stuck her head out, as if looking for someone.

There wasn't anyone.

"For a moment, I thought I sensed someone outside the window," said Hermione, looking thoughtful. She shrugged and returned to her seat.

Haven't lost his ability to protect himself against the greatest dark Lord of all times? Hermione must be mental to think that he was so powerful.

Harry swung himself into his bedroom through the open window and landed quietly on the carpeted floor. The Harry Potter they spoke of seemed to be so powerful. Someone greater than him, he thought unnervingly.

He walked to the wardrobe and opened it, discovering that it contained both male and female clothes. His eyes widened in shock at the number of clothes he had. The Dursleys had always given him Dudley's old clothes, now he had many new fitting outfits. Harry quietly shut the wardrobe and walked towards the head of the large bed. There was plenty of evidence in the bedroom that tallied with Hermione's story that he had lost his memory.

Harry could deduce that he used to be someone more. He was someone more influential, someone that they had looked up to. He just could not believe that he might be that someone.

A jar of messages and a photograph frame standing on one of the bedside table caught his attention. He picked up the photograph and discovered it was their wedding picture. The photograph was shot a

moment before they had shared their first kiss as husband and wife and it was clear from their expression of their faces that they were very much in love.

Frowning, he placed the photograph frame down. He took a closer look at the large jar. It was half- filled with small notes. Shaking the jar gently, one of the messages fell onto his outstretched palm. It was written in an elegant and neat hand.

Thanks sweetheart for the wonderful night.

His brows furrowed.

"You talked me into going into the House for a stroll to relax," explained Hermione from the entrance of the bedroom. Her arms were casually wrapped before her chest and she was surveying him closely.

Harry hastily stood up as if he was caught in a place he should not be in.

"What is this jar?" asked Harry apprehensively when Hermione walked closer to him.

"It is a message jar that I have given you on our first Valentine," said Hermione as she approached the bedside table. She picked up the jar and shook it so that more messages fell out into her outstretched palm and handed them to him. Harry blushed when he read some of the messages that she had written.

"I don't even remember the reason why you've written such notes to me," uttered Harry, placing the notes carefully on the bedside table.

"It doesn't matter, Harry..."

"It does!" exclaimed Harry harshly. There was an uncomfortable silence in the room. Harry turned away as Hermione took the messages and cautiously returned them to the jar.

He expelled a breath before turning to face Hermione. "I need to speak to you," said Harry firmly, watching her closely. Seeing that she had not objected, he continued solemnly. "I've given much thought to this thing between us," said Harry. "I can't."

She lifted her head so that their gaze would meet. "I won't break up with you."

"Hermione, listen to me..."

"No, Harry, you listen to me," insisted Hermione hotly. "I will find a solution to this particular amnesia. In the meantime, it doesn't matter if you don't remember, I can show you if you really want to know..."

He shook his head and touched her shoulder. Upon his contact, Hermione had visibly cooled down.

"Hermione, listen to me. The memories would be just a movie of two people, one who shares the same physical appearance of me. I don't have those feelings for you. Our relationship would be merely a façade."

Hermione turned away from him. A tensed silence engulfed the room. When she finally spoke, her words were laced with pain. "Divorce is unheard of here. We're too intimately linked to be away from each other."

Harry stared at her with an unfathomable expression. "If we're that closely linked to be apart, then it won't be a problem."

She turned around to look at him. "Harry, I want to be with you. We can get to know each other once again..."

Harry shook his head. "Well, I can't do that. I just can't. Give me some time."

She held his unwavering glance for several moments. Hermione expelled a sigh before dipping her head in an unmistakable nod.

The sounds of Hermione packing her trunk summoned Luna into their room. Luna was soon joined by the rest of the group. Despite their violent protests, none of them could change Hermione's mind. They finally gave up and lent a hand to move all her things, mainly clothing and books, into the adjoining room.

He was relieved, leaving Hermione to their hands.

The whole process took place under an hour. When they were finally done, Harry shut the door to them. The resounding 'click' seemed to reverberate around the almost empty room. He took a good glance around the room.

The dressing table by the side was strangely devoid of all clutter, so was one of the stands next to the large bed. The cheerful photograph of their wedding stood alone by his stand. With a swish of his wand, the photograph frame fell onto the stand with a 'plonk'. Harry drew his hand through his hair absently, fully aware of the void in his heart.

He carefully slid the gold Celtic ring off his finger and put it away.

For the next few weeks, Harry made it a point to avoid her and her good friends at all cost. He kept his mental shields up all the time, effectively breaking all links with her. He would avoid his marriage quarters as much as possible. Harry even established a timetable to steer clear of Hermione. Harry would enter classes late so that he could avoid sitting with Hermione and wake up early to evade her. He had out-moved Hermione at her every attempt to look for him.

Harry could sense her pain at his absence but he did not know how to face her. It frustrated him that the person she really wanted was not him but the Harry of the past.

The only person he would be comfortable spending time with was Cho. Even since the day she had helped him, he felt quite intrigued by her. She was different. He could talk to her. Unlike Hermione, Cho did not see a need to change him. She also did not care about his fame as the Boy-Who-Lived and the youngest Lord of a Noble and Most Ancient family. They would spend time walking aimlessly in Hogwarts,

chatting about Quidditch, their shared love. He found that he was less bothered by the issue about Hermione whenever he was with her.

The students noticed that Harry and Hermione were no longer spending time together. Harry was walking along the corridors towards his next Ancient Runes class with the fourth-year Ravenclaws when he overheard some of the Ravenclaws gossiping about their break-up.

"I would think that it's because of Hermione. I don't see why Harry would like her in the first place. I heard she's very overbearing," one of the girls commented offhandedly.

He froze when he saw Hermione standing next to them. She was alone and it was clear from the expression from her face that she overheard the comment- a flash of anger appeared in her eyes momentarily before replacing with a blank look. Hermione clutched the books closer to her chest and averted her eyes.

He instinctively took a step closer to her, feeling a surge of protectiveness.

He halted when she looked at him.

What in Merlin's name was he doing? Did he just want to hug her?

"Maybe he couldn't stand her possessiveness. He was always with her after they got together."

Harry narrowed his eyes in annoyance. "Don't you have anything better to do than gossiping about others? Lessons are starting soon," said Harry coldly, glaring at the girls. He marched past the girls and an astounded Hermione, into the classroom, befuddled at the way he responded.

Another rumour soon spread through the school that Harry and Hermione weren't quite over each other since Harry defended her.

A few days later, Harry was astonished when he received an invitation to a meeting with the other elusive Heads of the Ancient

Families the next day. A regal-looking owl had delivered the letter to him while he was sitting at the stands of the Quidditch pitch. Harry knew that the four families had a pact but they had always run things on their own. His curiosity about them drove him to hurriedly scribble an affirmative answer.

He hastily adjusted his tie one last time before the entrance of Professor Dumbledore's office. Satisfied that he was presentable, he walked into the room.

The three other heads were already sitting in the sitting area, obviously lost in thoughts. The younger man was watching the large grandfather clock intently as if willing time to go faster. It took about a second for the dignified man with snowy white hair to notice his presence and he stood up.

Harry glanced at his watch nervously.

"You're on time, Harry," answered the old man kindly, with a large smile on his face. "Take a seat." He pointed to the large armchair facing the two other occupants in the room. "Professor Dumbledore had kindly lent us his sitting room for our meet."

Harry cautiously lowered himself into the armchair, watching the two other Heads carefully. The younger Lord looked very grim as he watched him closely. Lady Bones was watching him with keen interest.

"What would you like to have? Some pumpkin juice?" asked the old man graciously.

"T-that would be great. Thanks."

Almost immediately, a house elf dressed meticulously in a black suit appeared with a goblet of pumpkin juice. He carefully placed the goblet next to Harry before disappearing. Harry caught a glimpse of his family's emblem on his chest pocket.

Harry noticed that there was a frown etched on Lord Black's face.

An uncomfortable silence engulfed the sitting room.

"How was your day, Harry?"

"I had lessons," mumbled Harry. "You're Lord Greengrass right?"

"Oh, yes I am. Uncle Os will do, Harry. How forgetful of me, I ought to introduce everyone. The one dressed in black is Lord Sirius Black, you may call him Sirius." Lord Black acknowledged it with a brief tip of his head. "The lady next to him is Lady Amelia Bones and you may call her Aunt Am." The corner of her lips lifted up in a smile. "We're really a family. I had the privilege to watch your father grow."

Family? Was this the family that Cedric mentioned then? Harry frowned. "You watched my father grow?"

Lord Oswald smiled. "Oh yes, I'm ten years his senior. I see him as a younger brother I never had. Your father was very playful when he was young and he caused your grandmother plenty of grief. In fact, Sirius and Am, who are both your dad's age, would usually lend a hand to create mischief."

"That's not quite true," protested Lady Bones. "James never needed help. Sirius was also his best friend from school. He and your dad were in Gryffindor."

Harry glanced at the quiet harsh-looking Lord.

Lady Bones nudged him on his ribs. "Sirius, why don't you share some of the things that the Marauders did?"

"Marauders?" echoed Harry, looking at Amelia.

"James and Sirius started a group known as the Marauders. They are basically mischief-makers," said Amelia with a smile. "Your dad used to act as if he owned Hogwarts."

"You can't fault him for that. James sort of did since he's the heir of Gryffindor." argued Sirius, folding his arms.

"Harry is also an heir of Gryffindor but he doesn't act that way," shot Amelia.

"He's more like Lily than James, that's why!"

"Your parents made Sirius your godfather, by the way," said Lord Greengrass, ignoring the bickering couple.

He frowned.

"If he was my godfather, why did I have to stay with my relatives?"

Silence filled the room as the three Heads of the Ancient Families exchanged looks between one another.

"I was in Azkaban and I was only freed recently when the truth was unearthed," said Sirius, averting his eyes.

"Truth? What truth? Who helped to free you?"

Sirius trained his eyes on him.

"Hermione and you. The both of you found out the truth behind the betrayal of your parents, hatched a plan to catch Wormtail and appealed for a re-trial of Sirius's case. You and Oswald came to me with new evidence that he was innocent during your coming-out ball," explained Amelia, smoothing the ends of her skirt.

None of it sounded familiar to him.

He raked his hand through his hair.

"I'm quite sure I haven't done anything of that sort," said Harry defensively, shaking his head. "I'm not suffering from amnesia."

"There is a record of that case in the Ministry if you need verification," said Aunt Amelia, crossing her legs.

"It's clear that you don't quite believe Hermione," commented Uncle Oswald unemotionally.

"It's not that. It's difficult to believe that such an amnesia condition exists," said Harry, racking his hand through his hair. "The memory of my life appeared to be intact. It is only with regards to you, Hermione and her friends that things no longer make sense. I don't remember any of you but you claim that I know you."

"Did not Madam Pomfrey, an excellent healer, said the same? At the same time, you realise there are some truth in her words. Are you not curious about the times she claimed that we used to spend?" Oswald gently persisted.

Harry frowned.

"No," said Harry coldly, standing up. "Thanks for the meet but I've got to leave- I've some homework to attend to."

"Wait Harry, we know that you probably want to know more about your parents. We gave you vials containing memories of your parents for your birthday. You can find them under your bed," said Oswald suddenly. "Your parents' journals should be together with those vials too."

Harry halted for a moment but he did not turn to face them. "Thanks," said Harry with a no hint of warmth. He exited the room promptly.

"He doesn't even recognise us or Dobby!" yelled Sirius, finally unleashing the frustration that he was suppressing. He climbed onto his feet and paced around the room like a caged tiger.

"Calm down, Sirius," said Amelia. "Oh, you might have unwittingly touched a nerve there."

Oswald frowned. "I sort of guess that. He was opening up when I messed up the whole thing. I don't understand. Should he not be happy knowing that he had people who truly cared about him?"

Amelia shrugged. "I don't know."

"Os, you know that this is a result of dark magic. There must be a solution in that library ..."said Sirius.

"No way!" declared Uncle Oswald vehemently. He expelled a breath. "I've said this before when Hermione broached the subject. My stand has not changed."

"Os, it's the only way..."

"No! I don't want to see anyone corrupted by the power. The magical world only requires one Dark Lord."

"I have every right to enter the library as you do, Oswald. Harry is my godson; I can't sit here and do nothing!" Sirius growled.

"Then find the library yourself. There must be other solutions to the problem. Hermione and Harry are joined at their souls. It must count for something. I just want Harry back, with or without his memories."

Sirius collapsed into his seat, with his head in his hands. The idea of not doing anything frustrated him. Silence ensured in the room for a moment.

"Do you have any clue who the culprit is, Am? What has your ongoing investigation revealed?" asked Oswald.

Her brows drew into a frown.

"The line of investigation into recent deaths of Azkaban was difficult because most stopped eating after being in there a while. I'm going to take a look at the visiting records since that might be another way to flee. As for the culprit responsible for Harry's condition, I'm in the process of looking into it; so far my investigation has revealed that the professors of Hogwarts are in the clear."

"Do you think it might be Karkaroff?"asked Sirius.

"He gives me the impression that he's like Wormtail- a coward," said Oswald.

"I haven't eliminated that possibility. He could have done it to ensure that his Champion wins," said Amelia. "I'll need more time to pursue all lines of investigation."

The days zoomed past and everyone was once again preoccupied with school work and the upcoming Valentine's Day. Harry continued to avoid Hermione and her friends as if they were plagues. Hermione refused to give up looking for information regarding his condition and her friends had no choice to help her out.

On Valentine's Day, Hermione woke up alone in her oversized bed. It had been weeks since she shared the bed with Harry and it looked as if she was going to spend Valentine's Day alone. She could still remember their first Valentine's Day together- they had a good time in school and in the House. She hastily halted herself from recalling those sweet memories she shared with him, afraid that it would break the flimsy emotional barrier that was holding back her despair.

She must not lose hope.

With that thought in mind, Hermione climbed out of her bed. Her bizarrely blank timetable had only one engagement for the day- dinner at the Chambers. The corner of her lips lifted in a small smile- it was their way of caring for her. She recalled the times when her protest fell on deaf ears- none of them believed that Valentine was a time for them to only celebrate with their partners.

Hermione expelled a sigh. Her friends had been very supportive since Harry had lost his memories. They spent long hours in the library with her, searching for a hint of his condition in those thick tomes in the library. She knew that they felt his absence nearly as keenly as she did. He was the axis of the small group of friends they had.

A small smile crept on her face when she spotted seven handmade cards on the dresser. There was a bouquet of Irises beside them. Hermione climbed out of the bed and picked one of them up. She recognised the handwriting immediately- it was written by Daphne.

"Happy Valentine's day, Hermione. It is also a day to celebrate Philia. I do hope you know what Iris means. See you at the Chamber for dinner."

The corner of her lips lifted in a smile.

She picked up the bouquet of Irises and took a whiff.

My friendship means a lot to you, huh?

She shook her head in amusement, setting the card aside. The Weasley twins merely signed those cards. Susan's message was the lengthiest and the mushiest of the lot and she was laughing by the time she finished reading it.

Hermione carefully put the cards aside, touched by her friends' gestures. Her friends would not allow her to pass fourteenth of February by herself. Her mind wandered back to her husband. How was he going to pass his Valentine's Day?

Hermione glanced out of the window at the blue sky outside. She caught a sight of Hedwig flying towards her.

The beautiful snowy owl landed neatly on the window sill, watching her intently.

"Did Harry send you here?" asked Hermione eagerly, offering her a treat.

Hedwig offered one of her leg slowly as if it pained her to do so.

She drew a sharp breath when she saw his gold Celtic band.

Hermione, he wants you to have this back.

Harry sat at the empty stands, staring at the blue sky, completely lost in his thoughts. The stands offered solitude, something he had prized. It was in seclusion that he didn't need to fit into the enormous shoes

that everyone had fixed him with. Besides, he was troubled by what he saw in the morning. In his attempt to find the vials of the memories of his parents, he found several photograph albums. The pictures they contained were mostly of him and Hermione. Along with the photographs were the details of when and where they were taken. He couldn't provide Hermione with happiness the Harry in the photographs could.

He closed his eyes and lay on his back, allowing the caress of the wind to soothe him.

"Hello, Harry," said Cho.

He opened his eyes and watched her approach her. Her long straight black hair was tied up in a neat ponytail.

"Hi, Cho," answered Harry, smiling. "What brings you here?"

She sat next to him, with a smile plastered on her face. "The Quidditch pitch was the first place we met each other, wasn't it?"

Harry nodded. "That I remember."

Cho returned a sweet smile. "I remember that match. Woods told you not to be a gentleman and knock me off the broom if you needed to."

He laughed brightly. "I remember that too. I remembered that I just couldn't do that," Harry added with a smile. A comfortable silence fell between them as they admired the scenery together.

"It's a perfect weather to fly," said Cho, standing up. "Let's get our brooms."

"Right now?" asked Harry incredulously.

"Of course right now, Harry. There is no one at the pitch. Hurry!" She grabbed his hand and pulled him onto his feet. Harry chuckled as summoned his broom. His faithful Firebolt appeared in a matter of moments. It hovered at height of his knees, waiting for him to ride it.

She lifted her brows in amusement. "That's some impressive magic, Harry. I'm not going to be outshone by some Gryffindor."

Harry chuckled as he watched Cho focused and summoned her broom.

Her broom took a while before flying before its mistress.

There was a look of triumph on her face as she looked at Harry.

"I'm impressed, Cho," said Harry. He threw his leg over his own broomstick, pulled it up and shot into the sky like a rocket.

"Not so fast, Harry!"

She climbed onto her own broom and chased after him. Her broom was no match for an international standard broomstick but she enjoyed the rushing wind and the adrenaline that roared through her blood as she climbed higher and higher into the air.

Harry hovered mid-air, waiting for her to join him. Cho pulled the broom to a stop and took in the scenery.

The imposing ancient Hogwarts castle was in full view, with the Black Lake just in front of it. The lake sparkled as rays of sunlight reflected upon its almost still surface. On the three other sides of the castle, miles and miles of lush green and unbroken forest stretched beyond their sight and surrounded the old fortress. The Forbidden forest looked peaceful from their vantage point with no signs of movement.

"This is my favourite spot," remarked Harry, gesturing around. There was a tranquil smile on his face. "It's beautiful in the evenings when the setting sun cast an orange glow around this place."

"It's splendid," agreed Cho, her eyes fixed on him.

They spend several minutes admiring the picturesque vista quietly.

Cho decided to spoil the moment. She bolted towards him and tapped him on the shoulders.

"Catch me if you can!"

Cho pressed herself on the broomstick and dived.

"Hey!"

Harry, with a large smile plastered on his face, pursued after her.

Cho tried to pull off several stunts to out-manoeuvre him, knowing that his broom was better than hers. He was always on her tail, like a relentless bulldog.

It was an exhilarating dive back to ground.

The ground was coming up to them fast as they continued to plunge.

"Pull up!" commanded Harry in panic. He urged his broom forward until he was nose to nose with her. "Cho, pull up!" He yelled, estimating the amount time they had before either of them crashed.

There was an insane gleam in her eyes.

He whipped out his wand, an incantation on his lips.

To his surprise, she pulled up at the last moment. Cho causally swung her leg over the broom. "Scared you, didn't I?" She said with a smirk on her face.

Harry landed on the grass with a light 'thud' next to her. "I guess I know how others feel when I use that stunt." He cleaned the sheen of perspiration on his brow.

Cho laughed gaily as she sat cross-legged on the grass "The feeling is amazing."

"You tire me out," mock-complaint Harry, plopping himself onto the grass.

"I guess Ravenclaw would have a chance against the Gryffindors for the next Quidditch game."

"That's great, we really need a good competitor," answered Harry, earning a smack on the arm from her. "Cho, what do you say to a dinner together after lessons?" asked Harry finally, watching her closely.

"What is the meaning of this, Harry James Potter?"

He turned and found himself staring at an enraged Hermione. Her hands were on her hip in an akimbo stance.

"Hermione..." Harry started as he climbed onto his feet.

"Cho, I don't want you to be around Harry. I know Cedric wanted you to stay close to him so that you can keep an eye on him. You don't have to do that any longer," said Hermione, training her eyes on Harry. "I've things to discuss with him in private." Her tone was steel and it sounded exactly like an order.

Harry gaped at her.

Cho nodded, took her broomstick and hastily left.

"You sent someone to watch over me?" demanded Harry, throwing his hands up. "Don't you feel as if you're taking things too far? Besides, you've no right to order her around."

"Have you forgotten that we're married? You asked for time out because you were uncomfortable being with me without developing any feelings. I know for certain that those feelings will not develop if you continue to avoid me. Besides, don't you think you're taking things too far by going out with Cho?" demanded Hermione. Her fists were balled with rage.

His facial muscles twitched slightly as he turned away.

"Cho and I are just friends," said Harry, shoving his hands in his pockets. "If you would excuse me, I think I want to head up to the tower."

"And hide in some place? I don't think so, Harry. I've given you enough time to think things through..."

"Enough to realise that you won't be happy with me. Your husband was a hero and I'm not it."

The anger in her dissipated immediately.

"You're my husband, Harry." Her tone had a hint of bemusement. Her forehead crinkled in thought. "You're jealous of yourself, Harry?" asked Hermione with a raised brow.

Harry blushed at the accusation. "I-It's not exactly that way..."

"It's from my point of view. Is that the reason why you're avoiding me?" asked Hermione tenderly.

"No," said Harry. He took a step back as he averted his gaze. "Not really."

"So what's the real reason, Harry?"

"Just that," answered Harry in frustration.

She was baffled by his answer.

"Just what, Harry?"

He raked his hand through his hair. "You never realise that I'm different. I'm not the bloke you married and I won't be him no matter how much you try."

Hermione looked as if she was struck by him. She balled her fists as if she was trying to keep a tight rein on her emotions.

Harry was stunned by the overwhelming flood of feelings. There were overtures of despair and anger amidst the surges of disappointment and pain.

"Hermione."

She advanced towards him with determination in her steps.

His eyes widen in shock when he felt the sting of his cheeks from her slap.

Without a word, she turned away and retreated back to the castle.

Harry blinked when he could no longer feel her emotions.

A/N: Hi,everyone. Well, I know I'm putting myself out for criticism because of the nature of the chapter. Well, it's an extremely difficult chapter to write because one needed to be very familiar with all the characters in the story and I was considering of an alternative. However, I chose to follow my initial decision in including this particular plot because it's a lead-in to the final plot of the fourth year. Have a blessed week.

Chapter 39: The Highly Awaited Final End to the Triwizard

Beta read by Leonineus

Everything seemed to click at once when Amelia was scanning through the report. Tonks had compiled a list on visitors of Death Eaters and Death Eaters that died in Azkaban. One particular name stood out among the rest - Bartemius Crouch.

Could it be a mere coincidence? Amelia thought, feeling uneasy. Based on the months of intense investigation, she had narrowed her list of suspected Death Eater to two individuals. These two highly unlikely individuals had the power to force Harry to join the competition. One of them was Mr Crouch.

He fitted the bill and wielded plenty of power. It would be a huge accusation to make...

"Amelia! Cedric and Harry are missing!" yelled Dan, barging into their makeshift headquarters.

Amelia paled.

Sirius leapt to his feet. "I'll look for the Professors..."

"Fred and George have already gone to inform them," interrupted Susan.

"I'll assist them," answered Sirius grimly, leaving the place in a hurry. "Keep me updated."

"Where is Hermione?" demanded Amelia, staring at the Grangers.

"She wanted us to tell you that it was a Portkey and that he has them."

"Wait. So she has shifted to him? Someone try contacting her. She might have the location," ordered Amelia, putting the records aside. "Someone try contacting Harry and Cedric."

The teenagers began to contact their companions as requested but there was no response.

Amelia began pacing up and down the small room, trying to figure a way to locate them quickly. They had only two choices: finding the servant or trying to make contact with them.

"We're on to something!" yelled Lupin, staring at the small handheld system that tracked the suspects they have been following since the Quidditch World Cup. "Subjects seem to be gathering in a place. We are beginning process to compute the coordinates of the location!"

"Are they in Great Britain?"

"Yes, but we need time to compute the exact location."

"Do you think their gathering have anything to do with Harry and Cedric's disappearance?" asked Jean.

"Most likely." Turning to Tonks, she commanded, "Summon all Aurors, they are to be fully armed and ready for a battle."

Tonks hesitated for a moment but she complied with that order.

"How long do we need to take to get the location?"

"A few more minutes. We will only be able to get the general location of the place, precise to the radius of ten kilometres," reported Oswald, taking controls of the small handheld device.

"They could be anywhere," remarked Daphne.

There was silence in the room.

"We've no choice but to search the entire area. The coordinates are out. It's located in central Britain." announced Oswald.

He whipped out a Muggle map of Britain, with the help of Dan, they marked out the location on it.

"There are two villages and several large private properties in that location."

"Those large private properties are Quidditch stadiums," said Amelia, peering at the map. "What are the names of the villages?"

"Great and Little Hangleton," replied Jean.

"He would need the bones of his father to resurrect himself," commented Oswald, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "It's an ancient belief."

"Why don't we trace the location where his family used to live? I believe that one would usually bury near the family home." suggested Luna suddenly.

"That's an excellent idea! I'll search where the Gaunts used to live. We might get a hit," said Oswald excitedly, summoning his house elf to gather the information.

Amelia stared at the non-magical map of Great Britain, deep in her thoughts. The fastest way to find them would be to locate this loyal servant.

"Remus, with me. We need to look for someone," instructed Amelia. "Oswald, if Tonks comes by, tell them to take orders from Sirius. He'll know what to do."

Lying against the lone tree by the Black Lake, Harry watched the outline of the setting sun blurred as the bright yellow blended with glowing orange. The entire Forbidden Forest was bathed in a tangerine glow as the sun sank into a bank of clouds.

Only twenty-four hours left to the concluding task.

Harry expelled a deep sigh.

He took his wand out from his pocket, checked the guide he had been carrying for any accompanying wand gestures and proper enunciation of the spell.

"That should be quite easy," muttered Harry to himself.

"Point me," whispered Harry, placing the wand on his palm. The wand swung towards his right and pointed north. A smile softened his features. He checked the final spell listed on the parchment.

His eyes fell on the neat scrawl on the parchment. He fingered the parchment almost tenderly as his thoughts wandered to a particular wavy-brown haired witch, Hermione. Ever since Valentine's Day, she had broken all contact with him- no thoughts and no emotions.

He picked up the thick book of offensive spells he had been reading and practising religiously for the past month and slipped the precious paper between its pages.

He let out another sigh. Did he not want anything to do with her? Why then did he feel so... miserable?

Harry pressed his palms to his face.

He had found the book along with the note outside the door of his room in the morning after the last task was announced to the four Champions. The final task was quite straightforward- the first person to reach the Tri-wizard Cup in the centre of the maze wins.

"There will be obstacles along the way. The next task would be an excellent test of your wit, agility and skills."

He remembered the accusing stares he received from Cedric and Viktor and the awkwardness between them. Fleur was more audible about her disapproval- she gave him a dressing down for choosing Cho over Hermione. It was difficult to explain the status quo between Cho and him to her so he hurriedly left the place to avoid talking to any of the champions.

"Harry? Not heading back in?" asked Cho, distracting him from his thoughts. She walked up to him, a concerned expression on her face.

Harry learnt from her that Hermione had apologised to Cho after Valentine's Day for crossing the line, an action he found admirable. After all, Hermione was his wife and she had every right to be angry if she thought that he was going out with another girl.

"I was just doing some last minute preparation," said Harry, gesturing to his tome. He stood up and dusted his cloak. "Let's head back to the castle, it's getting late."

Quietly, they fell into step, strolling back to the castle.

"Are you sure that it's enough?" asked Cho dubiously, breaking the silence. She reached out and tried to take the book from his hands.

"It is," defended Harry firmly, deftly moving the book away from her reach.

She widened her eyes in surprise as her hand fell to her side.

There was a long and fidgety silence.

"How do you feel about tomorrow?" asked Cho finally, breaking the awkward silence.

"Er - I've tried my best to prepare for it. After all, I'm up against three seventh years. I guess I would need to be lucky to survive..."

Her eyes narrowed in a glare.

"Survive? You should be thinking about winning the competition! It's an opportunity to prove that you do have abilities," protested Cho.

"I don't need the fame or the money..."

"- When you play Quidditch, don't you play to win? Moreover, if you do win the competition, it proves that you're the Harry Potter of the past right? Isn't that what you always wanted?"

Harry halted.

"What do you mean?"

There was a pregnant pause. She expelled a breath and spoke in a slow and deliberate manner as if she was explaining some obscure concept to a particularly dense person.

"The book that you're carrying faithfully like a talisman is from Hermione, isn't it?"

She ignored the way he stammered. "Look, I do know that you like Hermione and the only reason that is keeping you away from her is your self-esteem."

He stayed quiet but his jaws clenched and unclenched in irritation.

Harry's reaction indicated that she was correct.

"Well, if you win the Tri-wizard tournament, you can get back with Hermione."

His brows furrowed.

"Things are just more complicated between Hermione and me. Winning the competition won't solve the issues between me and Hermione."

"No, it won't. It will give you the courage to face her and talk things out. It will give you the confidence you lack to be with her."

Seeing that he was contemplating silently, she leaned in and kissed both of his cheeks chastely.

"For luck." She answered when he lifted a brow enquiringly. "I have lessons until the start of the last task. I'll be looking forward to see you win the competition tomorrow," said Cho, giving a smile finally.

The corner of his lips lifted in a smile. He knew it was Cho's way of letting him know that she knew that it was impossible for them to be together.

Weary and nervous, he headed to the Hall for breakfast at the Gryffindor table alone, the next morning. He spent a sleepless night tossing and turning in his large bed. He mindlessly acknowledged the well-wishes of his house mates when he past them in the hall.

Finally, he settled at an empty place at the end of the long table. Feeling queasy, he chose something light to eat.

Biting into his first toast, he was interrupted by the appearance of the Head of his house.

"P-professor Vector."

"Mr Potter, the champions are congregating in the chamber off the Hall after breakfast," said Professor Vector. "The Champions' families are invited to watch the final task and this is a chance to greet them. Good day."

Harry gaped after her.

Who would they invite to watch the competition? The other heads of the Ancient Families?

Curious, he finished his breakfast quickly. He walked across the Hall and opened the door to the chamber.

Cedric and his parents were just inside of the room, chatting with one another in low voices. He could tell from his expression that the Hufflepuff was very happy to see them again.

Viktor Krum was over in the corner, conversing with his parents in rapid Bulgarian which he, for certain odd reason, understood perfectly. Frowning in confusion, he turned his gaze to the other side of the room. On the other side of the room, Fleur was jabbering away in French to her mother. Her mother was the older and imposing version

of Fleur. Fleur smiled when she spotted him and gave him a small wave.

Harry politely returned it. Then he saw two auburn haired adults, standing by the fireplace, smiling at him. A glance at the woman and their clothes told him their identities.

Hermione's parents were Muggles?

His eyes widened in astonishment.

"Hi, Harry," said Dan, smiling warmly as he walked over. "Surprise!"

He nervously drew his hand through his hair.

Before he could greet them politely, Jean pulled him into a bone-crushing hug. He inwardly debated at keeping his arms at his side or returning the hug. After a few moments of contemplation, Harry awkwardly patted her on the back until she released him.

Hermione's mom smiled at him. "It reminds me of the first time that I hugged you- you didn't know how to react then. Hermione told me that you won't remember us. I'm Jean, Hermione's mom and this is Dan. You usually call him Dad and me, Mom."

Noticing his discomfort, Dan spoke.

"Os, Sirius and Remus will be coming much later-They were caught up with work. Amelia is already here, making sure that the risk any of you are exposed to is minimal."

"How did both of you get in? Hogwarts has a Muggle repelling charm around her."

"Professor McGonagall had to put a spell on us so that we could see and enter Hogwarts," explained Dan.

"Would you care to show us around?"

"Yeah, OK," said Harry, and they made their way back towards the door into the Great Hall. Harry was feeling very jittery.

Did they know about the condition of their relationship?

He was quite surprised when the Grangers stopped to talk to the Krums and the Diggory family, as if they had known them.

Harry was bugged with more questions. Were they not Muggles? How did they know them?

It was also quite clear that Mr Diggory and Dan were on good terms. Dan even introduced the Diggories to him when he noticed his enquiring stare.

Harry felt extremely uncomfortable when he noticed that the Krums and the Diggories were looking at him strangely. To his immense relief, Jean expressed her interest in touring Hogwarts again.

"We'll catch up during dinner or after the competition." called Mr Diggory after them as Harry led them away quickly.

The Grangers were very thrilled about Hogwarts, liking everything that he showed them. The way their eyes lighted up with child-like excitement as Harry took them around brought a smile to his face.

It reminded him hazily of someone he could not really put his finger on. He shook off the thought since it gave him a splitting headache.

They spend almost the entire morning exploring the interiors of the majestic castle.

The Grangers expressed a keen interest in the places they hung out and rest so he took them to these places.

He guessed that this was one aspect of Hermione's life that they never had the chance to explore and that they were making good use of it.

"The house elves do a great job maintaining the castle, ensuring that we have clean beds, a warm fire in the fireplace and good food," said Harry, giving the password carelessly.

The Fat Lady swung open nevertheless, eyeing the Grangers with keen interest.

"Never let us live in the magical world for too long," said Jean, looking very awed as she entered the Gryffindor common room. The room was large and comfortable looking. It was empty of all students because they had lessons. "I'll be too spoilt to do anything in the non-magical way when I return back home."

This statement was met with good-natured chuckles.

After exploring the castle, he took them out to the grounds.

The Grangers seemed sincere in getting to know him. They weren't as pushy as Hermione, he decided. At least, they hadn't tried forcing him to recall his past.

Harry treated them to a picnic lunch on the grounds so that they could appreciate the setting better. He took them to his special spot- a single tree by the Black lake.

He loved the place after chancing it by accident.

The view of the castle was extraordinary, yet there was just something exceptional about the spot he couldn't put his finger on.

The feelings of awkwardness had magically dissipated by afternoon. He did not know them but he was oddly at ease with them.

The conversation over the meal was light and sprinkled with good-nature laughter.

It stuck him suddenly that it was probably due to the past.

He remembered, from the photographs he had found, that they had spent some very memorable times together. It would explain why he had those strange, intense and frightening feelings about Hermione.

The moment they had finished the meal, house elves appeared to clear up.

"It is beautiful. I don't think it's comparable to the Potter Mansion," remarked Dan.

"Wait till you take the aerial view of the place, Dad. Endless lush green forests flank three sides of the aged castle. The surface of the large lake sparkles with the rays of the sun. It's so serene and majestic."

Dan chuckled lightly. "It sounds great."

There was a comfortable silence between them as they admired the scenery before them.

"Do you mind us being here?" asked Jean, suddenly.

Harry raked his hand through his hair. "Er...it was a surprise. I didn't expect that you would make an effort to come."

"Why wouldn't we?" asked Jean thoughtfully, watching Harry closely.

"How did you know who we were?" asked Dan curiously, staring at the clear waters of the Black lake. He was inching cautiously nearer to the lake; as if afraid that something might shoot out of the lake and snatch him.

"I had pictures of both of you. To be frank, Hermione is a splitting image of you, Mrs-mum."

Harry smiled when he saw Dan's behaviour. "It's very safe here, Dad, even though there are many creatures staying in the lake." His eyes brightened as if he thought of an idea. He took a small piece of bread from the basket. "Watch," said Harry, walking to the edge of the lake.

He tossed the bread into the water.

The piece of bread floated on the surface for a brief moment. Without a warning, a tentacle almost as large as a pillar appeared and snatched the toast into the water.

"W-what was that?" exclaimed Dan, wide-eyed.

"That's the Giant Squid," said Harry, laughing when he saw their matching looks of shock on their faces.

"I can tell why you have such a poor sense of danger," remarked Jean finally. "I can't believe that they made students enter the lake for the competition."

"It's really harmless," said Harry, amused when they stared at him disbelievingly. "Really," he added for good measure before bursting out laughing.

The Grangers seemed relieved to see him happy.

"Do you know what Hermione's busy with, Harry? She said she couldn't join us for lunch." asked Jean, enjoying the gentle breeze.

"Er- not really," said Harry, shrugging nonchalantly, staring at his hands.

The vague answer caused the two adults to look at each other meaningfully.

"That's strange," remarked Dan finally, looking at his son-in-law.

There was an impregnated pause as Harry stood up and began to pace.

Harry raked his hand through his hair and lowered his head.

"I've been avoiding her," muttered Harry, stubbing his toe onto the ground as he tucked his hands into his pockets. "She's been very upset with me."

Dan frowned.

"Are you saying that you've been pushing Hermione away? Did you know that both of you are married?" asked Dan pointedly, climbing to his feet.

He considered his question solemnly for a moment, recalling all the times he met Hermione. Truth was staring plainly at him and he could no longer refute the fact.

"Yes." It was whispered quietly but there was no hesitation in his tone.

Dan wanted to yell at him but he noticed his look of remorse. Not trusting himself, Dan turned away. He took several breaths to calm down.

There was an uncomfortable hush between them.

Dan turned to face Jean when he had control over his temper.

"Honey, would you mind giving us some time to ourselves? I want to speak to Harry privately."

"I'll take a look at Hagrid's place for a while," said Jean. Before she left, she held his hand and gave it a squeeze. She headed in the direction of the wooden hut, leaving them alone to talk.

Dan was staring intently into the waters while Harry squirmed.

"I didn't think that I would have to speak to you about responsibilities of a husband, Harry," said Dan finally, after a few moments of silence.

There was no hint of anger in his voice. He sounded almost troubled. His brows were furrowed in a frown.

"If given a choice, Harry, I wouldn't want either of you to marry at such a tender age," continued Dan quietly. "Marriage is more than just a piece of certificate or even a bond that was pre-destined before either of you comes to existence. It's a commitment of a lifetime, a

promise that requires you to put your back into it every day of your life."

He turned and looked at Harry. "I don't believe in divorce, Harry. I believe in earnest attempts at working on the relationship. We know it's never naturally 'happily ever after'."

"We are soul-bonded, Dad. I'm not too sure if we had fallen in love before we were married..."

"Does it even matter, Harry? For some cultures, couples have to learn to love and spend the rest of their life with that person after they are married. Besides, I know that Hermione will accept you regardless who you are."

"Regardless of who I am? She's been trying desperately to help me regain my memories as if she doesn't..."

"Doesn't accept you?"

Dan let out a sigh, running his hand through his hair. "You really need to spend time with her. Talk to her... To answer your question, Harry, both of you had begun having affections for each other before both of you were married. I believe that you and Hermione fell deeply in love with each other much later. It scares me as a father, sometimes, to learn the depth of her love for you. "

"I'll speak to Hermione," promised Harry solemnly.

Dan gave a small smile, clapping on his back. He began pressing several buttons on his watch.

"Er- how did you tell that we were not on good terms?" asked Harry cautiously.

"Both of you were so out of sync with each other... I think it's the nature of your bond that allows you to be so in tune to each other. It was really frightening..." There was a thoughtful pause. "However, it was amazing too," admitted Dan finally.

The corner of Harry's lips lifted in an understanding smile. He could definitely relate to him.

"Honey, where are you? We're done with the talk," said Dan, looking at his watch.

To Harry's surprise, there was actually a response from it.

"I'm at their marriage quarters. I'm with Hermione. I know you're dying to try it so portkey here if you wish," said Jean wryly, smiling.

Harry visibly swallowed when he heard that his wife was with his mother-in-law.

Dan chuckled warmly and gave an affirmative response. The picture of Jean swam away from the small screen.

"What was that?" asked Harry, his curiosity getting the better of him. "You have a portkey?"

"The watch was created by you, Harry. It's been very useful to keep in contact with everyone in the magical world and Jean. It acts as a portkey between all of us."

His eyes lit up with child-like excitement. "Hold on. I've never tried the function yet."

Harry grabbed hold of his father-in-law as he pressed one of the buttons. There was the familiar feeling of being hooked behind his navels as he jerked forward. Harry nearly fell when he felt his feet slam against the carpeted floor but he managed to straighten himself.

Dan, however, wasn't that lucky- he landed on his bottom in an undignified manner.

"Are you alright, Daddy?" asked Hermione, laughing as she help her father up. Dan cheerfully wrapped his arms around his daughter in a hug.

"How dare you laugh at me," said Dan cheerfully, roughing her hair slightly.

"Dad! I spent a good hour taming my hair!" said Hermione in indignation.

"It's fine, honey. You still look pretty," laughed Dan. He grabbed Harry firmly by his shoulders and prevented him from slipping away. "Don't you think so, Harry?"

Harry turned bright pink and he lowered his head.

The smile on Hermione's face faded immediately as her eyes fell on Harry. The shock on her face was replaced by an emotionless mask.

"So what were you talking about moments ago?" asked Dan, breaking the silence. Dan chose to sit next to his wife, leaving Harry the seat opposite his wife.

"About your tour? Mummy said she enjoyed it," said Hermione, with a smile on her face. The smile did not quite reach her eyes. It was clear that her mind was elsewhere.

Harry warily sat in the armchair with panic written all over his face.

The adults shot a knowing look at each other before talking between themselves.

Everyone was so occupied that they did not notice the goblets of chilled pumpkin juices magically appearing next to the new occupants.

Hermione was watching Harry keenly, with a light furrow between her brows as she absently sipped her pumpkin juice.

Uncomfortable, Harry pretended to listen to the interesting conversation that Jean and Dan were having.

"Sweetheart, why didn't you tell us that there were creatures like the Giant squid in the lake?" asked Jean suddenly. "Never in your letters

did you mention that there are dangerous creatures residing in the school."

Hermione nearly choked on the drink she was drinking.

"Hermione, are you alright?" asked Harry worriedly, patting her back.

Their gaze met for a second before Hermione lowered her head. She unnervingly drew her fringe behind her ear, nodding.

"Er-I'm sorry," said Harry, pulling his hand away from her when he realised that it was lingering on her back.

Hermione almost smiled when she noticed that his face had turned into a cute shade of red.

"Thanks," muttered Hermione.

"Er- i-it's alright," mumbled Harry, lowering his head.

"So, why didn't you tell us about those dangerous creatures?" asked Jean finally, with a pleased expression on her face.

"I wouldn't consider the Giant Squid dangerous, Mom," said Hermione, looking at Jean. "It's really as harmless as a fly."

"Well, I haven't seen the Giant squid doing anything besides snatching food that are floating on the surface," added Harry, shrugging.

"If you consider a thing of that size harmless, what would you consider as dangerous, sweetheart?"

Hermione swallowed visibly, contemplating an answer.

"It's quite a long list. In fact, I would say that anything Prof Hagrid finds cute and cuddly," said Hermione.

Jean tried to put the question as innocently as she could. "For an example?" encouraged Jean.

"Well, there are...We are quite safe in the castle, Mom and Dad," concluded Hermione impatiently, catching herself.

Her eyebrows narrowed when she realised that Harry was trying his best not to laugh at her.

Slightly annoyed, she nudged Harry on the ribs.

Harry, unable to hold his laughter any longer, clutched his stomach and guffawed. Seeing that Harry was laughing so hard, Hermione grinned.

The situation was not as hopeless as she thought.

The sky soon grew dark and dusty. Harry made his way down to the Quidditch pitch with Hermione and the Grangers. They had done a fine job helping him to forget his nervousness.

They walked him to the entrance for the champions.

Jean embraced him firmly, wishing him luck.

"I'll be fine." assured Harry, returning the hug. He cast a side cast at Hermione and realised that she was nervously chewing the bottom of her lips, clenching and unclenching her fists.

When Jean pulled away, Harry gently took her hands into his.

"I'll be fine, Hermione. We really need to talk after everything has come to an end."

She looked a bit unsure of herself for a moment.

"Oh heck," muttered Hermione to herself, throwing her arms around Harry. Harry was momentarily taken aback but he soon felt at peace. She completed him, he thought in surprise, wondering how he could deny it for so long.

He wrapped his arms around her and gave her a squeeze.

Contact me if anything goes wrong, thought Hermione, meeting his gaze.

He gave her a small smile before heading into the entrance for the champions.

The excited voices and rumbling of feet as the crowds began to fill the stand made his stomach clammy. He mentally ran through the list of spells that he learnt in an attempt to keep the butterflies in his stomach away.

The Quidditch pitch was completely unrecognisable with twenty-foot hedges running around the edges of it. He walked through a gap and found himself at the entrance of the vast maze. Beyond it, the passage looked dark and sinister.

The three other champions were already there with the other judges and teachers.

Mr Bagman approached him with a wide smile plastered on his boyish face. He threw his arm good-naturally around his shoulders. "Confident?"

"I'm OK," answered Harry as Mr Bagman led him closer to the group. He arched his brow in surprise when he saw Lady Amelia with the other teachers. She looked almost stern, talking to the teachers in low voice.

Most of the teachers were wearing red luminous stars on their hats except for Hagrid who had it on the back of his moleskin waistcoat. Mr Crouch looked particularly foreboding, dressed in wizard robes of dark colours.

"We are honoured to have the Head of the DMLE, Lady Bones here." There was a polite applause and Lady Amelia acknowledged it courteously. "We take your safety seriously. The teachers will be patrolling along the edges of the maze." said Professor McGonagall with a grave expression.

Professors Dumbledore, Flitwick, Moody, Snape and Hagrid nodded sombrely. "If any of you get into difficulty and wish to be rescued, send red sparks into the air and one of the teachers will come and get you. Do you understand?"

The champions nodded and practiced sending red sparks with their wands.

"Sure you don't need more help, Harry?" whispered Cedric as the teachers checked their wands once again.

"No, I'll be fine," whispered Harry back, surprised that he would even offer.

"Good," said Professor McGonagall. "I'll hand the time over to Mr Bagman who will brief you for the final time."

"It is about time to start," said Mr Crouch finally, checking his wristwatch. "It's best that we head to the stands too."

The three Heads of the schools wished their champions good luck before following Mr Crouch out.

"Off you go then!" said Bagman brightly to the five patrollers. They set off in different directions, to space themselves around the maze.

"The first person who reaches the Triwizard cup wins this final task. As mention, the champion with the highest points so far goes into the maze first, followed by the rest in the same order. The committee wants me to remind all of you again that if you are unable to overcome some of the obstacles in the maze, don't hesitate to send the red sparks," said Bagman smiling jovially.

Bagman then pointed the wand at his throat and muttered, "Sonorus!" and his magically magnified voice echoed into the stands.

"Lady and gentlemen, the final task of the Tri-wizard tournament is about to begin! Let me remind you how the champions currently stand! In first place, Lord Potter of Hogwarts School!"

The roaring cheer and applause sent the birds from the Forbidden Forest fluttering into the darkening sky.

"Tied in second place, Mr Cedric Diggory and Mr Viktor Krum of Hogwarts School and Durmstrang Institute respectively and finally in third place, Miss Fleur Delacour of Beauxbatons Academy!"

The announcement was also accompanied by loud applauses, especially for Cedric.

"On my whistle, Harry. Three... two... one..."

Mr Bagman gave a short blast of the whistle and Harry dashed forward into the maze.

The towering hedges cast eerie black shadows across the path, and they had been enchanted to silence the sound of the surrounding crowd. All Harry could hear was his thumping heartbeat as he ran along the path of the maze. Realising it was too dark to see anything, he whipped out his wand cast the *lumos* spell, lighting up his path.

Just a few minutes later, he heard another short blast of whistle and Harry knew that he was no longer alone.

He dashed another fifty yards until he reached a fork.

Going with his instinct, he turned left. He heard Bagman's whistle for the third time. All the champions were in the maze.

He sped up.

The path that he chosen looked completely deserted and he began to wonder if he had taken the correct one. It would be a waste of time if this particular path led him to a dead end. When he was presented with another fork, he took a right after using the Four-point spell.

North was somewhere at his right and the centre of the maze was at North-east. He realised that it was best for him to take another right if he came across another fork. Positioning his wand as high as he could so that he could see farther, he ran as fast as he could.

Still, there was nothing in his path.

As he hurried down the path he had chosen, Harry had a distinct feeling that someone was watching him and he shrugged off the feeling. After all, the maze was most probably designed in a way so that the spectators could watch them.

It became increasingly difficult to see as the sky continued to darken.

The path that he had taken was void of all obstacles and he began to worry. It felt as if that the maze was luring him into a false sense of security. Then he heard a movement to his right. Moving solely by instinct, he leapt out of the way as a mammoth Blast-Ended Skrewt hurled into his way.

"Impedimenta! Stupefy!" roared Harry, pointing his wand at it. The spells bounced off the armour of the creature as it skidded towards him.

"Deprimo!" shouted Cedric. The spell hit the soft fleshy belly of the Blast-Ended Skrewt and blast a large crater in the creature.

"I've got it, Harry!" shouted Cedric emerging behind the giant Blast-Ended Skrewt. "Hagrid is going to kill me if he knows that I've just killed one of his pets."

"Experiments," corrected Harry, catching his breath. "He gave us the job to rear them."

Cedric shook his head, cleaning himself of the body fluid.

"Best to keep away, there are more back where I came from," said Cedric, dashing out of sight into another path. "See you later."

He nodded, watching Cedric disappearing into the path he had chosen.

Harry bolted into another alleyway, keen to put a lot of distance between himself and the Skrewts. Then as he turned a corner, he saw a girl.

The moon was just rising, setting the place a glow.

Her long wavy and brown hair fanned around her as she lay unusually still, her face tomblake pallid. The moon drank of all her colour and there was a kind of deathly grace about the way she laid on the grass.

Curious, Harry slowly lowered his wand and approached.

Her brown eyes were wide-open and she looked strangely stiff.

His heart stopped.

"Hermione?" whispered Harry as he stood like a statue. His knees buckled under him.

No, it can't be!

Lowering his gaze, he spotted a large gaping wound on her midriff.

His heart stopped momentarily.

No!

He ran to her side, sliding along the grass and pulling her still body into his arms as tears began to fill his eyes.

"No!" yelled Harry.

Realisation dawned upon him suddenly as he cradled her close to him.

"Wait, a moment, you're not Hermione," said Harry finally, wiping the tears off his face with the back of his hand. She may look like Hermione but she was not her.

"Riddikulus!" shouted Harry. There was a loud crack as the pseudo-Hermione exploded in a wisp of smoke. He straightened himself, surprised to know that the Boggart had taken the form of Hermione dead rather than a Dementor.

"Point me," he whispered as he placed the wand on his palm. It had pointed somewhere to his right.

He took a right, then a left then a right again. Harry found himself facing dead ends twice when he went too east, and he retracted his steps to one of the forks that he took the wrong turn. There was an odd golden mist floating ahead of him.

He could not see if there was an end to the mist as he approached the mist guardedly, pointing his wand's beam at it. His brows drew into a frown as he tried to remember the kind of spell that would produce such a mist.

He used the four point spell once again and realised that he was on the right track. He would have to double back a long distance if he did not want to take this path since the other paths led to a dead end.

He was still hesitating when he heard a piercing scream a distance in front of him.

"Fleur?" yelled Harry, running into the enchanted mist.

His world turned topsy-turvy the moment he entered the mist. Harry was hanging from the ground, with his hair on end, with the endless star-filled sky and the moon dangling below him. Harry looked desperately at his feet and saw that they were magically glued to the grassy ground above him. He could hear his heart thumping loudly like loud bass drums.

If he took another step forward, he was going to plunge to his death.

Blood rushed into his head as he contemplated on his situation.

What could he do?

Blood was pounding in his ears.

None of the spells that he had practiced could reverse the effects of an illusion spell. He didn't want to be stuck here.

He pondered over the list of spells he knew and found one that he could attempt.

"Er- Finite Incantatem!" He yelled, scarcely expecting it to work. To his astonishment, his world righted itself suddenly and he fell forward onto his knees. He felt temporarily limp with shock.

"I can't believe a simple spell was all it takes," said Harry, raking his hand through his hair absently. Harry took a deep and steadying breath and got up again.

"Fleur," he mumbled under his breath as he sprinted forward. He came to another junction and stopped. He had no idea where Fleur was and there was no red sparks.

Was she alright?

Was she too hurt to fire red sparks?

He couldn't help thinking that it was one less rival for the Triwizard Cup.

Using the point-me spell again, Harry took a right, feeling increasing apprehensive about the whole tournament. The path he took led him to several dead ends and he had not crossed the path of Fleur yet. On one hand, he was delighted that he would not meet the obstacle that took Fleur down, yet he was worried about her safety.

He gave a sigh of relief when he saw red sparks being fired in the air somewhere to the right of his position.

It took him a good fifteen minutes to search for a new route he could take.

Knowing that his chances of winning were falling with every dead end he found, he sprinted along the path as swiftly as he could. He rounded another corner and found himself face to face with an ten-foot-long Blast-Ended Skrewt.

It struck Harry in that moment that it looked more like an enormous scorpion with its long sting curled over its back. Its thick armour glinted in the light from Harry's wand.

He hurriedly ducked when the Skrewt issued a blast of fire from its end and smelled burning hair- it had singed the top of his head.

Harry rolled over and fired a stunning spell at the giant creature. The spell bounced off the shiny armour. The Skrewt lunged at him.

Without considering his actions, he withdrew a small blade within his pocket and plunged it into the underside of the Skrewt. The blade expanded in size and he could hear the tearing of flesh as it plunged deeper in to its flesh.

"Expulso!" He yelled as the creature exploded before his eyes, covering him with the green fluid of the Skrewt. He cleaned the slime covering his eyes off with the back of his hand. He pointed his wand at himself and used the cleaning spell to get rid of the fluid.

"I'm definitely getting a long shower when it's over," muttered Harry.

He was momentarily distracted by the sword. Harry gingerly lifted his sword with a hand, surprised that it felt like a natural extension of him. The blade reduced its size suddenly and he sheathed his tiny Gryffindor sword back into its scabbard after cleaning it thoroughly.

So it was more than just a decoration, he thought in amusement. He needed to ask Hermione about the sword.

Satisfied, he moved forward again.

He lost himself a few more times before he found himself a new path.

In his hurry, he nearly walked straight into a mystical creature he saw only in his books.

It had a body of a large lion but the head of a woman. The sphinx was watching him closely, showing no signs of hostility.

"You're very near your goal. The quickest way is past me."

The voice was hoarse and deep.

"So may I pass?" asked Harry, knowing what her answer would be.

Suddenly, an image of a younger Hermione standing before seven bottles in front of a large black fire flickered in his head. She was pacing up and down the line of bottles, reading the scroll and muttering to herself.

He stared at the sphinx disconcertingly.

"Answer it correctly and you may pass. Answer it wrongly and I'll attack. Keep silent and I'll let you walk away."

Harry expelled a deep breath. "May I have the riddle?"

The sphinx took a step closer towards him so that moonlight bathed its face with its pale glow. Its voice took on a mysterious and throbbing edge.

"I with borrowed silver shine,
What you see is none of mine.
First I show you but a quarter,
Like the bow that guards the Tartar;
Then the half, and then the whole,
Ever dancing round the pole
And true it is, I chiefly owe
My beauty to the shades below."

Harry stared at the sphinx, bemused.

"Can I have that slowly?" Harry enquired, thinking hard.

The sphinx gave the riddle, line by line as Harry muttered to himself. He lifted his head and stared at the large moon looming overhead, casting a soft pale shade over the maze.

He paced around the place, trying to put them altogether.

"A tartar bow," mused Harry, stroking his chin. He remembered that it was curved almost like a new crescent moon.

"Quarter, half then whole," murmured Harry. "It's the moon," said Harry excitedly.

A smile stretched across the Sphinx's lips as it moved aside for him to pass.

"Thanks!" said Harry elatedly, dashing along the path.

It was getting increasingly darker and he knew that he was nearing the cup.

A few minutes into the path, he heard something in the path running parallel to his which made him stop.

It was a voice belonging to Krum.

"Crucio!"

The air was suddenly filled with Cedric's anguished yells. Terrified, Harry bolted toward the source of the voice, anxious to get to Cedric as fast as possible. Towering hedges stood between his path and Cedric's.

Harry pointed his wand towards the hedge and used the cutting spell on it. It turned out to be fruitless-the hedges magically repaired by its own. He tried the reductor spell and the explosion spell he saw Cedric used but they turned out to be useless.

With no other options left, he withdrew the Gryffindor sword and expanded it to its normal size. He stared at the blunt blade,

wondering if it could actually cut through the hedge. He raised the sword above his head and brought it down. To his surprise, the blade had sliced through the hedge as if he was cutting tofu.

The hedges did not re-grow, much to Harry's relief.

Cedric was lying on the ground, twitching and jerking as Krum stood sombrely over him.

Without a thought, he pointed the sword at Krum.

"Stupefy!" yelled Harry.

The spell hit Krum on the front, causing him to fall forward and collapsed onto Cedric. Harry squeezed himself through the small hole. Anxiously, he rolled Krum away from Cedric after dropping the sword to the ground.

Cedric had stopped twitching but was panting hard from the torture he had received.

"Thanks," he muttered, lying on his back. All colour had drained from his face.

"Are you alright?" asked Harry, helping Cedric up.

"Yeah... I can't believe... Viktor would do that," said Cedric, squeezing his eyes close.

"Can you get up?" asked Harry firmly.

"G-give m-me a moment," said Cedric. After a few seconds, he climbed unsteadily onto his feet. He fired red sparks into the air, which hovered high above Krum, marking the spot where he lay. "We can't leave him here this way," said Cedric, breathlessly.

"After what he has done to you? Didn't you hear Fleur scream? He most likely hurt Fleur too," said Harry in disbelief.

"It's so out of his character to attack any of us," muttered Cedric, racking his hand through his hair as he stared at his body. "I think we might have to inform Amelia."

"We've done the best we could," answered Harry, shrugging.

The sound of rustling leaves and broken branches was the only warning they had.

A massive pincer shot out from the broken hedge, grabbed Harry and lifted him into the air.

The spider was larger than the Skrewts they had met earlier and it was at least fifteen foot tall. It had pulled Harry towards it.

"Diffindo! Stupefy!" yelled Cedric.

There was little effect on the massive Acromantula.

Harry struggled madly as he tried to free himself.

"Stunning and slowing spells don't work, Harry!" yelled Cedric in panic. "I think it's resistant to magic!"

"You know I can tell!" shouted Harry, resorting to kicking the pincer of the large spider when his stunners and slowing spells had no effect on it.

In fact, they had made it even more furious.

He yelled in pain when the pincers closed tightly on him.

"I can't get a clear shot!" yelled Cedric in panic, dodging its long powerful legs.

"Take my sword!"

Cedric dodged its fraying legs and dived for the large Gryffindor sword that lay beside Krum. He awkwardly lifted it, swung it over his

head and brought it down on one of its eight legs. To Cedric's surprise, the Acromantula collapsed to its side.

The spider tried to snap at him with its venomous fangs but Cedric parried its fangs with the sword. He twisted the sword a little and sliced its bottom fang. Cedric ducked immediately when it started thrashing.

Harry yelled in panic as the giant spider flung him in pain. Pain shot through him as he fell from the height of twelve feet.

Cedric got out of the way from the spider. Mustering all his strength, he hacked another of its legs.

The spider lumbered around like a drunk, threatening to squash Harry who was lying a distance away.

"Diffindo!"

"Stupefy!"

Body fluid from the spider splattered around the hedge and ground.

The spell slashed the belly of the spider into two as it keeled over sideways and strewing the path with a tangle of hairy legs, threatening collapsing on Harry. "Harry!" shouted Cedric, sprinting towards him, dragging the sword with him.

Harry had wisely levitated the spider before it collapsed on him. Flicking his wand, he levitated the spider to the large empty space and dumped it aside. He lay on the ground, panting heavily.

"You all right?" asked Cedric, checking on Harry. Cedric used a cleaning spell on Harry, removing all the fluid of the spider on him.

"Yeah, mostly cuts," said Harry, healing most of the wounds that the spider had inflicted upon him. "And a broken leg," said Harry, pointing to his leg. It was lying in an odd angle. He climbed upon his feet unsteadily as he looked at Cedric. "Otherwise, I'm fine, I think."

There was an overwhelming sense of familiarity as if they had worked together very often.

"It looks bad. You sure you're okay? I guess I should have taken up Care of Magic Creatures..."

"I don't think it's useful knowing how to care for an Acromantula when it's trying to kill you."

Cedric chuckled in amusement as he handed Harry the sword.

Cedric sighed when he saw Harry lifted it easily. The Gryffindor sword reduced in size once more and he sheathed it.

Harry frowned when he realised that Cedric was taking in everything too easily.

"We really should inform someone. You're badly hurt..."

Cedric trailed off when he spotted the gleaming Triwizard Cup standing magnificently on the plinth just several metres away.

"I don't think that is needed." said Harry, staring at the glistening cup.

The two guys stared at each other.

"Heck," said Cedric, drawing his hand through his filthy hair. "I mean why not?"

"I think you should take the cup, you saved my life after all..."

"-And broke your leg. Look, you saved mine just now, so the cup belongs to you..."

"No! I would have been badly hurt if you didn't intervene..."

"I would have been dead if you didn't rescue me, Harry," argued Cedric, frowning.

Harry sat on the grass, his hair thoroughly tousled and dirty from the frequent scratching of his head, and expelled a sigh. "It's not getting anywhere, Cedric."

The corner of his lips lifted up in a small smile. "I can't believe it isn't the obstacles that are keeping us away from the cup."

"Don't you want to go back and take a long shower?" asked Harry finally.

Cedric nodded enthusiastically.

"Let's take each side of the cup then..."

Cedric thought about it. "It's better than sitting beside a large dead spider, bickering on who should take the cup." He pulled Harry to his feet and Cedric easily supported Harry's weight. Together, they approached the cup.

They stared at each other enquiringly when they stood on each side of the cup.

"Think they'll split the cup up?" asked Cedric.

Harry chuckled. "Not likely. Looks strange if it's only half of it. On the count of three then."

"Three- "

"Two-"

"One."

There was a familiar jerk somewhere behind his navel and the familiar howling of wind.

The next thing Harry knew, he felt his feet slam onto the ground. His injured leg gave away and he instinctively grabbed something to support his weight. Harry nearly fell down from fright when he realised that he was using a tombstone for support.

"Oh Merlin," commented Cedric, who climbed onto his feet. He brushed the dust off his bottoms, taking a good look at their surroundings.

A faint mist surrounded the graveyard, where a dozen of fallen gravestones and an abandoned funeral chapel stood in the distance. The only sounds that they could hear were the beating of their hearts.

"Keep your wand out," said Cedric with a grim face, "I'm going to contact Am." He turned to his watch, pressing a few dials.

A bone-chilling voice broke the silence.

"Avada Kedavra!"

A blast of green light shone blazed through Harry's eye lids.

There was an explosion so loud that it caused his eardrum to vibrate. Something detonated into a million of pieces.

The powerful blast knocked Harry off his feet and sent him flying.

The pain in his scar increased to such a pitch and he was fighting to keep his eyes opened.

The last thing he saw was a person in dark cloak.

"S-stupefy!"

It was a voice he knew.

Blackness consumed him and Harry knew no more.

"How peculiar, the cup has disappeared," commented Dan, looking at Hermione. "We can't see what's going on in the maze with those tall hedges."

Without a warning, she leapt onto her feet. "Tell Aunt Am that the cup was a portkey and he might have them," yelled Hermione shrilly, disappearing into the crowd.

Identical expressions of fear were reflected on both of her parents' faces. Dan leapt to his feet, took his wife's hand and made their way to the Judges' table.

"We'll inform the Professors," said Fred to the other teenagers. The Weasley twins took off in another direction, towards the maze.

Daphne, Luna, Neville and Susan chased after the Grangers, anxious to help them in every way possible.

Her heart was beating furiously as Hermione dashed to an isolated area of the Forbidden forest.

"I must keep my wits," she chanted, fighting the fear that threatened to engulf her. Her heart was beating furiously. She knew she could not go there unprepared- it would kill all of them. She hastily came out with a mental list of things she needed to bring.

She needed to head to an isolated area to Apparate. The Forbidden forest was appealing since no one would approach the forest in the night.

She lighted her path with her wand.

The sound of the crowd grew fainter and fainter as she ran away from the crowd into the forest.

Sounds of dry branches cracking a distance away from her were the only warning she had.

She ducked.

A bright red bolt whizzed past her and ricocheted off a tree.

Without a thought, she whipped out her wand.

"Impedimenta! Stupefy!" yelled Hermione, breaking into a run through the thick undergrowth. Her heart was beating frantically. Adrenaline was pumping wildly through her veins. Hermione knew she was most disadvantageous on open ground.

Her opponent was invisible to her. She had only two choices: to goad him to reveal his position or force his hand.

Her spells did not hit.

They began exchanging curses and hexes. It was apparent that her opponent was not out to kill her. She began hatching a plan as she dodged or attacked. His position could be roughly estimated from the sound of the broken twigs.

All she needed was a chance.

She chose the second choice.

She was familiar with the tempo of his casting and she chose to counterattack the second he cast his spell.

While he cast the blasting spell, she summoned his invisibility robe then disarmed him.

The servant was not expecting that she would summon his robe to expose his position. In the brief moment of surprise, he lost the upper hand- he lost both his wand and his invisibility robe.

He laughed brightly. "You're quite good at duelling, Ms Granger."

Hermione recognised the voice.

She illuminated his face with her wand.

"Y-you?"

Taking advantage of her astonishment, he whipped out his spare wand and neatly cut the tree behind and in front of her using two fast cutting spells.

"Sectumsemptra!" yelled he.

The leaves rustled noisily as the large trees tumbled down.

Hermione side-stepped and dived onto the ground and she narrowly missed the trees. However, she was not lucky enough to avoid his spell. A large gash formed across her right wrist.

Hermione let out a yell of pain, dropping her wand.

He lazily summoned their wands into his hands.

"Not bad," said Mr Crouch with a cruel smile, pocketing her wand as he approached her slowly. He pointed his wand at her, reading the expression on her face.

He was standing before her, watching her with a satisfied smile.

"Really not bad at all. A good wizard keeps a spare wand. I've been watching you, Hermione Granger since the night when you saved Harry from the lake. I knew that something was different about you. You had me confused for a moment when both of you fell out with each other. Yet, you seemed to know whenever Harry was in danger as if you're connected to him..."

Hermione slowly climbed to her feet, keeping her silence. His words made her realise that he wasn't the one responsible for Harry's loss of memory. Someone else had done that. Someone else in the castle had done that.

Ropes shot from the end of his wand and wrapped around Hermione's body.

A cruel smile spread across his face.

"He is with the Dark Lord right now, Ms Granger or should I say Lady Potter..."

"You're the servant of the Dark Lord but who are you?" questioned Hermione, trying to distract him. She quietly cut off the ropes with wandless magic.

His face lighted up with delight, excited to share his side of his story. "I'm Bartemius Crouch Junior, this man's son."

Everything seemed to fall in place. He had been taking Polyjuice. She recalled Amelia sharing the tale of Mr Crouch.

"So it was your mother who died in your place. Your father smuggled you out..."

"On my mother's instruction," interrupted Crouch menacingly. "He didn't love me but he loved my mother and she begged him to do so. She was careful to drink every single drop of the Polyjuice and died in my name... He'd placed me under Imperius after I was brought home and left to the house elf's care..."

"Winky's care? So you were the one who cast the Dark Mark into the air that night," ventured Hermione.

He smiled. "You're right. It scared away those cowards that swore loyalty to my master. My master found me and freed me from his hand. He sent me here on an important mission to get your husband and I succeeded. My master will reward me for my devotion after tonight."

There was an insane gleam in his eyes.

"You've had a taste of the Imperius curse and I'm not allowed to kill you. Let's have a little fun, shall we?"

He took a step closer to her, with the spell on his lips.

Without a warning, she leapt at him. She grabbed his wand with one hand and tugged, causing him to stumble forward, as she punched him firmly with the other. There was the awful sound of breaking cartilage.

Crouch stumbled backwards.

She had effectively disarmed him.

He was, however, not going down without a fight. He lurched at her with outstretched hands, trying to take possession of his wand. He hurt her with a wandless "Sectumsempra". Hermione stepped to the side and tried to stun him with her wand.

Crouch whipped out another wand from his pocket and cast the shield spell in time to deflect. Without missing a beat, he shouted "Crucio!"

His head felt very heavy as he began to stir. He tried to massage his scar but he realised that he was firmly bounded to the headstone. His entire body ached and he was bleeding in many places. Harry tried to speak but he realised that he was gagged. In desperation, he pulled against the chains that bounded him and they rattled noisily.

A stone cauldron large enough to hold a full-grown man caught his attention and he could see that the surface was alight with sparks. The potion was hissing and a burning red.

A man he recognised as Wormtail was doing the ritual. He approached him, with a silver dagger dripping with blood. One of his arms ended in a bleeding stump as if he had just chopped his hand off.

"Blood of the enemy ...forcibly taken. You will ...resurrect your foe."

He tugged helplessly against the chains, knowing the inevitable. He let out a strangled scream when he felt the silver dagger plunging deep into his arm. Wormtail fumbled around for a vial to collect the gushing blood.

Wormtail poured his blood into the potion.

The moment the potion turned white, Wormtail collapsed, whimpering and nursing his bleeding stump.

The cauldron was simmering, sending its diamond sparks so bright that it turned everything else dark in all directions.

Through the mist, he saw, with icy dread, the dark outline of a man, tall and skeletally thin, rising slowly.

"Robe me," said the high and cold voice. Wormtail, still sobbing, hurried to robe his master with one hand.

The man approached Harry. Harry found himself looking into the crimson eyes of the newly-risen Lord Voldemort.

He looked away from Harry and began examining his body. Enthrilled and thrilled, he ran his fingers over his new body, taking no notice of his servant.

A large snake slithered back into sight and slithered away.

A figure in dark cloak made his presence known by bowing deeply. Lord Voldemort acknowledged the bow with a nod and the figure disappeared out of sight.

Voldemort slipped his long fingers into his deep pockets and withdrew his wand. He raised the wand and pointed it to Wormtail. "Cedric Diggory must be kept alive, was it difficult to comprehend Wormtail?" asked Lord Voldemort silkily. The trembling servant screamed when he was magically lifted into air and tossed violently onto a headstone.

A cruel smile appeared on his face as he watched the diminutive man whimpered in pain.

"I- t-thought that. I-I'm s-sorry, M-master but please..."

"Fortunately for you, Wormtail, the young boy is not dead. He's barely alive but at least not dead," said Lord Voldemort. "I expect you to follow my instructions carefully in the future."

The servant gave a whimpering but audible yes.

He grabbed his unharmed arm to expose the Dark mark. It was a vivid red tattoo; a skull, with a snake protruding from its mouth. Voldemort examined it carefully.

"It's back," he muttered quietly. "They would have noticed it. Now, we shall see and we shall know." Without a warning, he pressed the Dark mark with his slim fingers.

Wormtail let out an anguished scream.

It was joined by Harry's as his scar burned with intense pain.

The Dark Mark had turned into jet black.

The Dark Lord ignored his servant and regard Harry with keen interest.

"The Great Harry Potter or should I say Lord Gryffindor, Head of the most noble and ancient House of the Potters. You stand upon the grave of my late father, a muggle, in the shadow of their former imposing mansion." He gestured to the desolated house upon the hillside.

"A Muggle and a fool; just like your mother. They both have their uses, didn't they? Your mother died to defend you. I killed my father and see how useful he has proven to be in death."

He let out a cruel laugh, satisfied to see that he had enraged Harry. "My mother and her family used to live on the fringe of my father's estate. She fell in love with him. My father abandoned my mother when he learnt that she was a witch. He left her and returned to his Muggle parents before I was even born and she died giving birth to me, leaving me to be raised in a Muggle orphanage." Lord Voldemort's pitch hitched with disgust. "She gave me, the descendant of a great noble and ancient family, the true last heir of Slytherin, his filthy name, Tom Riddle."

He let out another high-pitch laugh. "I revenged myself upon him and killed his family."

His red eyes darted from grave to grave, with a satisfied little smile.

"Surely you understand the importance of having the right relations, Harry? I was told that you left your Muggle family and aligned yourself with the rest of the Ancient families like a true Pureblood..." His eyes flickered to the hooded figure by the side.

"I'm not like you," growled Harry.

Voldemort laughed.

"Naturally. I wouldn't have fallen into the hands of my enemy because someone sowed discord among my companions. You're a fool, just like your family. Your parents died to protect you and your grandparents died from grief. Your grandparents could not do anything because of the silly pact."

Harry yanked the chains furiously, causing Voldemort to laugh.

The Grangers, along with the Daphne, Neville and Susan, managed to make their way down to the Judges' table. The judges hurried down to the maze after directing them to a large tent erected at the corner of the maze.

Amelia, Lupin, Oswald and Sirius were in the tent.

"Amelia! Cedric and Harry are missing!"

The Dark Lord approached the opposite headstone where an unconscious Cedric was firmly bound to and scrutinised his features. He was heavily bruised in many places due to the explosion. Blood was trickling down his face from his head. He was barely breathing and was in a severe condition.

"Lord Voldemort honours his word. I'll spare his life and give you those potions in honour of your service. He would be very useful if you're able to control him..."

The hooded figure sank deeply in a bow in gratitude.

The watch on Amelia's hand vibrated and she answered it immediately even though they were following a trail.

It was from Sirius. The professors led by Mr Crouch, along with the Weasley twins were combing the large castle slowly. They had discovered their disappearance just moments after they were gone. He had Professor McGonagall to confirm that someone had left the school compound via a portkey moments ago. She instructed him to take charge of the briefing and contact Oswald for the location.

"Where are you?" demanded Sirius sharply.

"I'm with Remus. We're tracking the suspected servant. We'll be fine. With that she ended the transmission.

"I smell blood... and Hermione!" exclaimed Remus. Amelia and Remus broke into a run, with their wands out. Relying on Remus's keen senses, they followed the trail that both of them had made, bringing them deeper and deeper into the forest. It was clear that she was being chased since she was running forward in a random way, zigzagging through the thick undergrowth. The thick branches of the undergrowth had caught her in many places, leaving faint traces of her blood. There were also traces of spells on the trees.

"I recognised this place. This area of the forest is dangerous," said Amelia. "Hagrid brought us here to pick up a creature for the last task..."

Remus halted suddenly and gestured Amelia to do so. They remained very quiet for a moment. He closed his eyes, trying to decipher the sounds he was hearing. There was a faint scurrying sound, so faint that Remus had to strain his ears to listen.

"I think we better hurry. She's definitely in danger."

Tonks apparated into the room suddenly. "Where is Lady Bones?"

"She's following a lead. She has already placed Sirius in charge," said Oswald, drumming his fingers impatiently, scanning through the list.

"I've got a match! The village of Little Hangleton. The Gaunt had a shack on the fringe of the village," announced Oswald. "Try locating the graveyard. It shouldn't be too difficult to find."

Tonks nodded and Disapparated.

The forest was getting thicker as they ran deeper into it. Suddenly, they heard someone screaming. They could recognise that voice. It was Hermione! They quickened their pace, running through the undergrowth.

They were close now and could see silhouettes.

There was another yell. There was the awful sound of a body being ripped into pieces. The thick scent of fresh blood permeated the cold air.

The sound of scuttling grew louder and it sounded as if they were coming from all sides.

In a distance, they saw many colossal Acromantulas advancing towards Hermione. She was pushing them back with fallen trees and slowing spells. However, it seemed as if nothing could stop them in their pursuit. The spiders would climb over the dead bodies of their comrades and advanced forward.

There was just far too many of them and she looked as if she could not hold out too long.

"Hermione!" yelled Remus, blowing some of the giant spiders up with powerful blasting spells. "We'll cover you."

"Uncle Moony?" she called in a mixture of surprise and relief.

"We'll cover your back!" yelled Amelia, whipping her wand out. She hastily made a barricade with fallen trees. Amelia turned them to rocks when they collapsed, killing many large spiders.

It helped them to buy time for Hermione to escape.

There was more furious clicking and the spiders seemed to press on with greater determination.

Hermione slowly made her way towards Amelia and Moony. When she was completely out of the way, Remus cast a potent fire spell.

"Fiendfyre," yelled Remus. Remus was nearly thrown back by the power of the spell. Flames exploded from his wand like fireworks and scorched everything in its deadly path.

The spiders along with the trees began to burn with great intensity.

In the light of the raging flames, they saw that Hermione's face was covered with dirt and blood. She was tear-stricken and was trembling with fear.

The raging fire turned everything it touched into dust.

"We've got to leave. The fire will burn out on its own," said Remus, putting his arm around her shoulder and steering her away from the scene. He was worried for her since she was trembling like a leaf.

"Grabbed my arm," said Hermione with a hint of resolute. There was much to do. Harry and Cedric were still in danger. The two adults did as they were told and they found themselves apparated away.

There were several 'pop's and swishing noises announcing the arrival of a group of masked and cloaked men.

Lord Voldemort's attention was shifted to his family.

They stared at one another enquiringly, fidgeting nervously in where they stood. Harry could imagine surprised faces behind those masks at the sight of their master alive. Like a well-rehearsed play, they dropped to their knees, crawled towards the Dark Lord and kissed the hems of his robe with great reverence.

Almost as if the routine was ingrained in them, they stood up and form a circle around their master, enclosing Harry and Wormtail.

There were gaps between them, as if they were waiting for more people to join them.

"Welcome, Death Eaters. It has been thirteen long years since we last met. You seem well, with your powers fully intact. I see that you seem to be surprised that I would even return."

No one dared to speak.

"You, who witnessed my power and the preparations I've painstakingly done to prevent a mortal death, would even doubt... I ask myself as I waited quietly the last thirteen years the same question- why would a band of wizards who swore allegiance to their master not come to his rescue?"

"Maybe, I thought to myself, it was because that they believe in a greater power. Another power great enough to vanquish even the Lord Voldemort. Perhaps even great enough to counter Albus Dumbledore's abilities. I confess myself disappointed..."

"Forgive me, my Lord..." whimpered a Death Eater, throwing himself at the foot of Voldemort. Showing no pity, he tortured him with the Cruciatus curse, causing him to scream in pure agony.

He stared at his followers calmly.

"I do not forgive. I do not forget. Get up, Avery. I want thirteen years of service. Wormtail here has paid some of those debts, haven't you?"

He whimpered pitifully, holding his stump.

"You came back to me not out of loyalty but of fear. However, you've aid me in resurrecting my body. Lord Voldemort rewards his followers... Give me your arm."

With a flick of his wand, Voldemort had conjured something silvery. He carefully shaped the silvery thing into a perfect imitation of a hand. Voldemort directed it to fit it into his stump.

His whining stopped abruptly. Wormtail couldn't believe his eyes when he flexed those silver fingers.

"Oh, thank you my Lord!" exclaimed Wormtail in excitement, kissing the hems of Voldemort's robe. "Thank you, my Lord."

"I expect more faithful service from you, Wormtail."

He nodded vigorously, climbed onto his feet and joined the circle.

Voldemort began approaching each of the Death Eaters, silky reprimanding them or promising a better future for them.

Voldemort stopped once before a space large enough for two. "The Lestranges should stand here. They were faithful. They would rather go to Azkaban than to renounce me... When we take possession of Azkaban, they will be honoured beyond their dreams. The Dementors would join us, they are our natural ally. We will recall the banished giants. I'll have all my devoted servants return to me and an army of creatures whom all fear..."

He walked on until he came to a large gap. He stood there, surveying it as if he could see people with his red eyes.

"Here we have, six Death Eaters missing. Three dead in my service. One too cowardly to return... he will pay. One, who I believe has left my service forever. He will be killed... and one who remains my most faithful servant. He has already re-entered my service. He was at Hogwarts and it was largely due to his effort that our young friend was brought here tonight."

Harry felt all eyes turned to him.

"Our dear young Lord Gryffindor..." said Voldemort silkily. He touched Harry's face with his long fingers, causing his scar to burn intensely. It was clear that his protection was no longer effective against him.

He began recollecting his story of how he was killed and his failed attempt at getting the Philosopher's Stone. He punctuated the tale by casting the Cruciatus curse on Harry.

It was pain that he had never experienced, causing him to buckle and scream in pure agony. It felt as if his nerves were replaced by barbed wires and he screamed. Every fibre of his being was on fire, even his bones. There was no end to it. He wanted it to go away... he wanted to die.

They had reached the marriage quarters safely despite the state of Hermione's mind. Hermione looked even worse in light. Her clothes were torn in many areas and she even had a large bleeding gash on her arm. Her robes were covered with muck and blood.

Hermione was ghostly pale but she was hurrying around the place, packing the things she would require as she recollected, "Crouch Junior was the servant that Voldemort planted. He followed me to the forest in an invisibility cloak when I hurriedly left the stands..."

"We followed the trail and saw the marks left by the battle," said Remus.

"I believe there might be another servant in the castle," said Hermione, putting the two invisibility cloaks in a bag with trembling hands. "He didn't know that Harry lost his memory of us."

She handed the Marauder's map that she had found in Harry's trunk to Remus. He activated the map immediately.

"This might be useful, Uncle Moony. I didn't ... He didn't give me Harry's location though..."

"You must be bloody insane," said Amelia finally, putting her foot down. "You're not going to rush into battle in this state."

"Harry's in danger. Voldemort isn't going to turn him loose after he has been resurrected. We don't have much time..."

"Enough for me to heal you while Remus gets in touch with Sirius," said Amelia calmly. She forced Hermione to take a sit as she began healing and cleaning her wounds. "We have already determined the location where Harry and Cedric might be. Sirius has already finished briefing the Aurors. By the look of things, you will be courting your death if you choose to go alone."

She cleaned all the mud and blood with the cleaning spell. She frowned when she realised that she would have a scar on her right arm from her encounter with Crouch.

At least she managed to survive the battle, thought Amelia in relief.

"Amelia, there's a glitch back at the Ministry. Fudge got a wind of everything..."

"What?" demanded Amelia leaping to her feet, "Heal Hermione. I noticed that Hermione has two Invisibility cloaks, accompany her. I think you'll know what to do right, Remus."

"I'll focus on bringing both of them back," said Remus, taking over the task of healing Hermione.

"Good luck. We really need it," said Amelia. Using the watch, she portkey to the Ministry.

Remus finished the task that Amelia was doing. "The Death Eaters have already gathered. I believe the Dark Lord has been resurrected so we'll have to take precautions."

She nodded and listened attentively to the plan he had.

Harry yelled until his throat was hoarse.

Then the pain stopped when Voldemort lifted his wand.

He shared with the Death Eaters how Wormtail returned to his service and how they learnt about the faithful servant from Bertha Jorkins, the hidden library and the Triwizard Tournament when Wormtail chanced upon her.

"I knew that I had the blood of the fifth Ancient House, the house of Gaunts, flowing within me. I didn't know that I could inherit a legacy. I managed to uncover the hidden library that housed the largest collection of books on Dark Arts. It was there where I found the potion I needed for rebirth. I needed the flesh of the servant, something I had on hand. For the bones of my father, I had to come here. Finally, I needed the blood of my enemy."

He smiled.

"I knew I needed the blood of Harry Potter, now also known as young Lord Gryffindor. If I wanted to be more powerful than before, then I must have his blood."

Voldemort gave a small and mirthless chuckle.

"We know that Lord Gryffindor was difficult to get, especially after the other Heads of the Ancient Family had taken over the duty to protect him. He was made untouchable by his relations and was powerful enough to denounce Albus Dumbledore. How do I put my hands on him then? Now see the way that fate favours Lord Voldemort. I was led to find another servant. One who is willing to do anything I bid of her." His eyes fell on the hooded figure guarding Cedric.

Voldemort smiled. "She was obedient enough to get close to Lord Gryffindor and distance him from his relations, making him vulnerable again."

It couldn't be.

Harry stared at the hooded figure carefully.

"However, I knew that she was only loyal to me so that she could get what she wanted; potions to entrance another boy," spat Lord Voldemort sardonically. "I think she might even like Lord Gryffindor after spending that much time with him. Did you not plead for mercy on his behalf? "

The hooded figure trembled.

Voldemort turned and faced Harry. A cruel smile was on his lips.

"Do you want to know who betrayed you, Harry?" said Voldemort silkily.

With a flick of wand, the hood was lowered.

Her long black hair spilled out of the hood, partially covering her face but there was no denying who she was.

Harry gasped.

It was Cho.

"My Lord... p-please spare me..." she sobbed pitifully. She fell to the ground and pleaded.

However, Lord Voldemort ignored her pleas.

"You're of no use to me, now that he knows your identity... Your beloved will take your place..."

Harry's heart beat furiously, instinctively knowing what was to come.

The corner of his lips lifted to form a cruel and twisted smile on his face as his gnarled long finger stroked his wand fondly.

The moon had cast a long shadow on his ashen face as those crimson eyes gleamed hungrily with blood-lust.

The next words were uttered, with a slight hint of uncontrolled child-like excitement.

"Avada Kedavra."

"NO!" yelled Harry, yanking the chains that bound him firmly to the grey gravestone. The bolt of green light cast an eerie pale glow on his face.

"No," whispered Harry hoarsely.

"No."

It was filled with disbelief. Unknown to Harry, a lone tear slipped down his dirt-smudged face. She began her descent, falling onto the ground with surreal grace.

"No!"

He screamed, yanking the chains with all his might before dropping his head, bowing. Those lively eyes were vacant as if life had been snuffed out like a candle flame.

"No." It came out in a weak voice as tears streamed down, leaving behind a trail on his grim covered face.

He knew she betray him but he couldn't fight the grief at watching her die before him. Harry let out a heart-wrenching howl.

A spine-chilling malicious laughter echoed around the graveyard.

There was a faint 'pop' sound which no one heard.

Remus was momentarily stunned when he look at the face of the revived Dark Lord and the body of Cho Chang. However, he got to work immediately, sneaking past the circle of Death Eaters to Cedric. He picked up the scent of a large snake a distance away and decided to use the wind to his advantage- proceeding only when the wind was against him.

Harry was so wallowed with misery that he did not notice that most of his wounds were healing on its own.

"I want there be no mistake in anyone's mind that I'm stronger than Lord Gryffindor. He escaped me by a lucky chance. I'll give him a chance to die with honour. Now, untie him and give back his wand."

Wormtail approached him and broke the chains with his new powerful hand. Harry was like a lifeless zombie- he fell onto the ground the

moment his chains were broken. The Death Eaters chuckled at the way he fell on his feet.

Harry! You need to pick yourself up. I'm here for you. Harry!

He blinked his eyes twice.

Hermione?

He let down his mental shields immediately after snapping out of his misery. She was completely exhausted and was running on pure nerves.

Hermione? What happened? What are you doing here? You'll get yourself killed...

Uncle Moony is freeing Cedric as we speak. We're here to rescue you.

Her tone was clipped as she struggled with her emotions. She could feel his pain and knew what he had been through.

You know this is completely insane! You shouldn't risk your life...

He could sense her irritation.

Well, you can't expect me to sit aside and wait for others to rescue you when you're in danger. I just can't.

Wormtail had returned with his wand. He roughly thrust the wand back to him.

"I believe you know how to duel, Lord Gryffindor," said Voldemort smoothly.

The Death Eaters began to close on them, leaving them with no room to escape. They were trapped. They needed a distraction.

There was hissing noises a short distance away and someone was casting spells.

The smile from Voldemort's face disappeared suddenly.

"Nagini!" he hissed loudly.

Remus had thrown Cedric over his shoulder like a sack and was battling with Voldemort's large serpent. The large snake was trying to corner Remus to a headstone by striking at him from different angles, slithering on the ground quickly.

However, she was no match for the speed of a werewolf. He neatly dodged all her strikes easily and pushed her with spells.

Nagini was badly hurt by his spell in many places but she was still determined to attack him.

Knowing that he didn't have much time left, Remus carved a large part of tail causing Nagini to thrash about in pain.

"You shall pay for it!" yelled Voldemort in rage. "Kill him!" screamed Voldemort, pale.

The Death Eaters began chasing him, throwing an assortment of offensive spells at him but Remus managed to avoid them with his lightening reflexes. Harry realised that his reflexes had been greatly enhanced.

I used the lightning element to boost his speed, explained Hermione.

Realising that his followers were too useless to kill him, Voldemort turned his wand on him. However, before the words could leave his lips, Remus and Cedric vanished magically.

It should not have been possible since he put a powerful several powerful wards around the graveyard for protection and to prevent Apparation.

He let out a yell of frustration, his red eye narrowing into slits. He turned around, wishing to vent all his frustration on Harry.

However, he was outwitted again.

Bodies of some of his stunned Death Eaters lay scattered on the ground.

Harry had grabbed Cho's body and was sprinting towards the gleaming Triwizard Cup. The adrenaline pumping in his blood helped him to get that far. He was just a short distance from the Cup.

He could not believe it.

They were actually going to make it out alive.

"Hurry! Get the boy!" yelled Voldemort in panic.

The terrified Death Eaters gave a chase, raining curses on him.

They were shocked when they realised that there was nothing they could do to stop the curses seemed to ricochet off Harry as if he was protected by a constant and powerful Shield spell.

"You fools ! Let me have him!" screeched Voldemort in a high pitch voice. "Avada Kedavra!"

There was the familiar bolt of green light.

Without a thought, Harry and Hermione launched themselves on the gleaming Triwizard Cup.

There was the familiar feeling again of being hooked behind the navel.

The last thing they saw before they were portkeyed away was the green bolt of light heading straight for them.

A/N: Hi everyone, it's been a long time since I last updated. This is a longer chapter to make up the lack of updating. Well, there was a mishap that prevented me from updating. In any case, I'm already on my next chapter. Have a blessed week

Chapter 40: Moving on

Beta-read by Leonineus

Dedicated to my Aunt and sister

"Love is patient. It keeps no record of wrong. It always trusts, always protects, always preserves. Love never fails."

Oswald paced impatiently along the boundary of the centre of the maze, waiting for them to return. He picked three Professors to accompany him – Professor McGonagall, Dumbledore and Hagrid. He sent the rest of the Professors to clear the crowd at the stands so that they would have the privacy they required.

Remus had given a summarised account of the events that took place in the graveyard and knew what to expect.

At the moment, Remus was searching for Mr Crouch Senior with the boys. The girls were by Cedric's side. He was still unconscious.

Professor McGonagall was as anxious as him. After all, no matter how gifted Harry and Hermione were, they were still teenagers. They would be no match for the Dark Lord. She was hoping, with all her heart, that they would beat the odds again.

In the graveyard of Little Hangleton, there was an unnatural silence.

Lord Voldemort threw his head back and let out a shriek of frustration when the green light struck the marble angel. The statue had exploded into pieces. If he had been just a second faster, he would have killed Harry Potter.

He must have the boy dead!

Around him, the Death eaters fell onto their knees, knowing that their master would severely punish them for their ineptitude.

"You fools!" growled Voldemort. "You can't even stop a man or a young boy!" He pointed his wand at one of the Death Eaters near him and tortured him mercilessly.

The Death Eaters shivered in fear and none dare to speak a word.

Suddenly, Voldemort's eyes widened in surprise.

"I believe we've got company," said Voldemort finally, lifting his wand from the unfortunate Death Eater. Someone was trying to remove the wards that he was setting up. A smile stretched across his face. "I would like to have my privacy for a while longer," said Voldemort silkily.

He gave the Death Eaters their orders.

The Aurors would only see what he wanted them to see.

There was the howling of wind and the blurring of vision.

Harry willed his eyes closed, feeling the recognisable jerk behind the navel. He remembered the green light and feared for the worst.

He clasped Hermione's invisible hand tightly, afraid that if he had let her go, he might lose her.

They had been holding hands since they sprinted across the graveyard to grab the Triwizard cup. He did not question her wisdom when she told him to focus his thoughts on shield as they made their getaway. He was astounded when he realised that spells would just deflect away from them just by willing a shield together.

Relief poured through him when she gave his hand a squeeze.

They were alive! They were heading back. They were going back to Hogwarts.

He felt himself slammed onto the grassy ground with a loud 'thud' and his face was pressed onto the grass.

"They're over there!" yelled someone.

There was a torrent of yells and gasps he could not comprehend. All he could think of was the safety of Hermione.

Hermione, on the other hand, panicked. She had to get away before anyone discovers them.

No, he mentally yelled when he felt her pulling away from him. He was too worn-out to even lift his arm to stop her. He knew she was equally drained. She took a lot effort to scramble onto her feet.

I've to leave.

He sensed her fear. They had managed to hide her presence from Voldemort. Hermione was afraid of being found next to him. It would raise questions and Voldemort would eventually learn of their secret. Then, all this secrecy would be for nothing.

He understood her fears but was astounded that she could still put his safety before hers in this state.

There was the sound of people hurrying towards them.

"No! It can't be..."

"Harry!" yelled Hagrid, rolling him over. "He's alive! Harry's alive!"

His face was pallid and his eyes strangely out of focus but he was definitely alive.

His mind was in a haze, barely recognising the person who held him. Now that he was out of danger, pain overwhelmed him. His nerves were still searing hot and it was aching everywhere. Harry hastily raised his mental shield as he grimaced.

Professor McGonagall gasped after she saw the body of Cho lying next to him. Harry had forgotten about her the moment they had returned to Hogwarts.

"Chang," said Professor Dumbledore. "She's dead!" His tone had a mixture of acute shock and disbelief. "How?"

"Bring them to the hospital wing," commanded Professor McGonagall finally, her voice trembling. "I'll handle everything else."

"Hermione, we know you're here. Don't move. There's no one else here," said Oswald in a composed voice.

Hermione calmed down and listened to him.

"Stay under that cloak, we'll get you to the Hospital wing first," commanded Oswald in a quiet voice. Even though he had requested the teachers to clear the stands, there was no guarantee that no one was watching them. He searched around the area with his hands until he found her. He gently helped her on her feet. "Dobby! Winky!"

The reliable house elves appeared, with anxious expressions on their face. Winky looked as if she had just cried.

"Take your mistress and master to the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey is waiting for them. Be gentle with them."

The two house elves gently took the arms of their owners. Oswald also took one of Dobby's arms. They Apparated away.

There was a profound sense of loss as the Professors stared at the body.

Professor McGonagall bent down and gently closed the eyes of Cho. She conjured a piece of white cloth to cover her. With misery in her voice, she told Professor Dumbledore that they would break the news to the Diggories.

Professor Hagrid levitated her with his wand.

A sense of pity washed over Dumbledore. It was going to be difficult for the Diggories. They would have to cope with the loss of their charge while their son's life was still in jeopardy. He shook his head and let out a sigh.

This was just the beginning. It was time to gather the old crowd, the old man thought tiredly.

Daphne, Luna and Susan were at the hospital, watching over Cedric. It was clear that he was not responding to any of the potions administered. Madame Pomfrey had cleaned and healed all his external wounds.

There were two 'pop' sounds suddenly.

"Harry!

Harry was on the bed, his eyes closed. Dobby was next to him, watching him helplessly. It was clear from the grimace on Harry's face that he was hurting badly.

"Uncle Os, please end the spell. I put a sticking spell," said Hermione weakly. Her voice came from the empty bed beside Harry and the girls realised that she was under an invisibility robe.

"Hermione! You're fine..."said Susan excitedly.

There was a smile on Oswald when he ended the sticking charm and removed the robe from her. "You never fail to astonish me," said Oswald, with mirth in his eyes.

Hermione looked very drained and pale. However, she did not seem to have any injuries.

"Alright girls, we need you to leave for a while," said Oswald finally. "Madame Pomfrey needs to check both of them."

Madame Pomfrey's lip thinned when Oswald told her that Harry was tortured by Voldemort. She hurriedly went the cabinet to retrieve several potions. He would need a lot of potions to endure through the night.

"That beastly man," remarked Madame Pomfrey irately. "There is not much I can do to combat with the after effects of that curse. I can

prescribe the strongest numbing potion for his nerves but it can only soothe his overloaded nervous system for three hours."

Madam Pomfrey administered several potions to Harry while she checked him thoroughly. Other than his overloaded nerves and his broken leg, he was physically fine. The matron hurriedly fixed his broken leg with a flick of her wand.

"The potion should help him some," said Madame Pomfrey. She did a check on Hermione. "All you need is rest, Lady Gryffindor. Your magical core is severely drained. It's best not to use any magic for at least a day. The wounds are healing very nicely."

Hermione nodded as if she knew.

Harry seemed to be quite relieved that she was alright.

"Do we need to stay for the night?" asked Harry, weary, swinging himself into a sitting position. The potions had begun their work and he felt somewhat better.

Hermione smiled at his use of "we".

"Both of you require a lot of rest," said Madame Pomfrey in a stern voice.

"I'll see to it that we'll get that rest," interrupted Hermione.

Madame Pomfrey seemed convinced. "Do you know what happened to Mr Diggory, Lord Potter?"

Harry became sombre at once. He swallowed visibly after a moment of hesitation.

"Someone tried to kill him with the killing curse. I'm not sure if the spell hit him. I think it missed him because something exploded and we were flung into the air due to the impact."

He glanced across the bed to look at Cedric. He looked as if he was sleeping peacefully. However, he could tell from his shallow breathing that he was not out of it.

The matron nodded understandingly.

"How's Cedric?" asked Hermione quietly.

"His vitals are very weak," said Madam Pomfrey, shaking her head, staring at the numbers floating above him. "However, they have remained unchanged for the past hour."

"As if he's suspended between the states of death and life?" suggested Hermione plainly, looking grim.

"Perhaps," answered Pomfrey.

The matron instructed the house elves to bring their owners back to their quarters and gave them two vials of dreamless potions.

"It's to help you to sleep," said Madam Pomfrey, looking at the troubled teenagers with a sad smile on her face. "You'll need it."

It was now completely dark and not a soul could be seen near the graveyard of Little Hangleton. Amelia took the time to check the place out with some of the residents. It seemed clear that no one would dare to approach the graveyard or the Riddle House itself in the night because it was rumoured to be haunted.

That was good news since she could not handle any more surprises.

"I'm sure they'll be alerted to our presence the moment the wards go down. If they start fighting back, you're allowed to use any means to protect yourself. We're dealing with Death Eaters and the Dark Lord," reminded Amelia again, checking on the work of her subordinates. They were working on the wards surrounding the graveyard.

It was clear that Voldemort thought of everything.

Sirius and Amelia looked particularly tensed.

"I hope Moony has rescued them," comment Sirius, offhandedly. It was clear from his face that he was very worried about them.

"I've faith in both of them," said Amelia. "I don't want to waste this opportunity... they are quite respected members of the society and it would be dangerous if they remain so."

"Lady Amelia, the wards will be removed in another five seconds..." someone announced.

"Fall into position," commanded Amelia as the count-down began.

"Three-"

"Two."

"One."

The wards surrounding the graveyard crumbled and fell like the great walls surrounding Jericho.

The battle-ready Aurors rushed in, with their wands out. They cast an intrigue web of stunning spells across the graveyard. The red light ricocheted off some of the marble gravestones, weaved and intertwined, sweeping the entire cemetery in a matter of seconds.

Spreading out, the Aurors combed the cemetery like well-trained soldiers, apprehending anyone they had stunned.

To Amelia's disappointment, the graveyard was completely deserted. It was clear that Voldemort and the Death Eaters had already left.

"Damn! The wards must have alerted him early," spat Sirius, kicking one of the headstones.

The head Auror gave his report to Amelia, stating that they had stunned several men and found a strange cauldron of potion.

Amelia leapt to her feet and inspected the people they had found. The three unconscious men were robed in ordinary wizard robes and unmasked. The Aurors had bound them with ropes, an action highly unnecessary since they were clearly out cold.

"Avery, Crabbe and Nott," said Amelia, identifying them immediately. They wore no masks or hoods. These men were quite respectable men. Nott and Avery also held a position in the Ministry. They were also the men that they had been tracking for months.

It seemed so out of place, Amelia thought. It felt as if Voldemort had planted them on purpose and wanted them to discover these people.

The Dark Lord had also done a good job clearing up the scene in such a short time since they did not find anything else. She inspected the area near the cauldron carefully. There were no ropes or chains that were used to bind his hostages.

She could only rely on the testimonies of the witness and the captured men to prove that Voldemort and his cronies were back.

"Bring back a sample of that potion and put those men in Azkaban. We'll interview them tomorrow," ordered Amelia.

Seeing that the Aurors were busy with their task, Sirius strode out from the shadows and approached Amelia. "I've good news. They're back in Hogwarts, safe. Madame Pomfrey gave them something to help them to sleep and send them back to their quarters."

"That's great. However, we really need to speak to them soon. It helps them to accept everything that has happened tonight," said Amelia. She rubbed her hands together, trying to warm them.

He nodded absently.

"What about Cedric?"

Sirius looked very grim.

"He's still in comatose. I heard they're considering of transferring him to St Mungo's tomorrow if he isn't responding to the treatment."

Amelia sighed. "I just have a bad feeling about everything," commented Amelia.

Sirius placed his hand on her shoulder. "I know."

"Why don't you return to Hogwarts first?" suggested Amelia, finally. "There aren't many loose ends left to be tied up here and I know you'll be anxious to see Harry. I'll need to return to the Ministry and de-brief the team."

Sirius nodded and embraced her. "Don't be long. Be safe," he whispered. With that, he used the Portkey to return Hogwarts.

Dobby and Winky took them to their sitting room. There, they left the couple alone. Crackling sounds of the fire filled the small room.

Both of them sat in their respective seats quietly, knowing that a talk was long overdue. There was no way either of them could sleep if they did not talk to each other first.

Harry remembered the talk he had earlier with Dan and it felt as if it was a lifetime ago. He blocked his memories of his evening and kept a tight rein of his emotions.

Staring at death in the face had made his mind up. He frowned, not knowing if it was the best time to talk about their relationship.

"Are you still in pain?" asked Hermione, watching him with great concern.

The frown on his face disappeared.

"No," said Harry, remembering that he had his mental walls up. He hastily lowered them.

He blinked continuously when he felt her intense emotions. Her relief swept through him in continuous wave. There was a subtle hint of pain in the mix, as if she was trying to suppress that feeling.

It awakened the protective side of him.

"What happened?" demanded Harry urgently, taking her hand into his.

It was the only encouragement she needed- she tossed her arms around his neck and held him tight as tears began to flow unchecked down her face.

He saw everything that happened to her that evening in his head. He was looking at her memories as if it was a movie.

He saw an image of Mr Crouch with an insane smile on his face, about to torture her. Hermione's heart was beating frantically then.

Harry learnt that he was the faithful servant that he had placed in Hogwarts from the talk she had with him, knowing it was a cool-headed attempt to lower his guard.

He saw another image of Mr Crouch being ripped into many pieces by various pincers. Hermione was petrified. It was a horrifying way for him to die, even though he warranted every second of it. Harry would have ripped him apart for injuring Hermione if he were still alive.

He shuddered at the memory of being surrounded by the giant Acromantula. Harry knew exactly how it felt like being pursued by them. He and Ron had been hunted by them when they were trying to figure out the mystery behind the Chamber of Secret. Moreover, the fresh memory of Cedric and he battling one in the maze was something he could not easily forget.

Harry wrapped his arms around her tightly, stroking her back in his attempt to comfort her. His heart swelled up with pride. His mate was strong enough to beat a smart and resourceful Death Eater.

He finally understood the disturbingly intense emotions Hermione evoked in him. Cho might have taken his memories of her way but she could not take away his feelings for her.

Harry pulled away from her slightly and held her right arm. He gently turned it over. There was a large red swelling across her forearm.

His brows puckered at the sight of it.

"Harry?"

Lovingly, he brushed his lips against the scar.

Hermione grew wide-eyed and withdrew her arm suddenly, as if she was scalded by flames.

Hermione had kissed the scars on his back when she discovered them almost two years ago. She had nearly destroyed the beach in her wrath when she realised that he was abused by his relatives. She vividly remembered his reaction to her kisses- he pulled her into a hug, kissed her passionately and told her that he loved her.

Harry blinked continuously in surprise-the feelings that accompanied that memory were so intense. "I didn't know... It felt natural to do so." His cheeks were flushed. He cleared his voice. "What happened to those scars? I was amazed to discover that they were gone."

She hesitated for a moment.

"Well, you took a potion to remove it."

Harry gave her an arched look, noticing that she was very secretive. She was usually very forthcoming about his past.

"How did you find me?" asked Harry finally, changing the subject.

"Well, we can shift to each other- it's a skill that we possess. I took Uncle Moony along. I enhanced his speed and reflexes but that drained a lot of magic..." Lightening was not her element in the first

place and elemental magic required a lot of magic.

"Why did you heal me then?" demanded Harry, his jaws clenched. "It was dangerous! Healing magic consumes a lot of magic..."

"You were badly hurt and I know my limits."

He bit back the retort, drew his hand through his hair and let out a sigh of frustration. He sensed her hesitation and her curiosity.

"You could ask me anything, Hermione," said Harry.

She faltered because she did not know if he was ready to share.

He turned away from her suddenly, as if he had guessed the question she had. An overwhelming sense of misery and pain swept her and she shuddered.

He put his head between his knees.

Hermione waited patiently, knowing that she had to give him time.

He expelled the breath he was holding.

"Cho was working for Voldemort and she did that in exchange of some potions to be with Cedric. Her mission was to get close to me to sow discord among us and keep me isolated. He killed her because of me- she pleaded for my life..."

Hermione wrapped her arms around him and pulled him into her embrace and Harry wept. He was not crying because Cho had betrayed him but for losing a friend. The sobbing grew louder as he released his pent up agony, fear and revulsion.

Hermione tenderly rubbed his back, trying to comfort him. She understood why he needed to bring Cho's body back. He did not want her name to be smirched in her death. Hermione knew it was going to be tricky to explain her involvement.

His weeping soon stopped and he pulled away slightly.

"I-I'm sorry, Her-"

His words trailed when he felt her hands on his face.

Almost tenderly, she cleaned the tears off his face with the pad of her thumb. Harry was enamoured by the love in her gaze. A look of determination crossed his face briefly and he reached up to take her hands into his.

Harry stared at their hands.

"Hermione, I don't know where to begin. I've been really stupid. I was so afraid. You were a stranger yet you invoked such strong emotions in me. I was so petrified when I realised that I'm so transparent before you and I was afraid you couldn't accept me. After all, you were married to a confident, powerful..."

Hermione tossed her head back and laughed brightly.

Harry understood the reason for her amusement. He knew that his assumptions were grossly incorrect. He held up his hands in surrender. "I know I was wrong. I was foolish and egocentric. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

He lifted her hand and brushed his lips across her knuckles. "Would you forgive me?"

A smile stretched across her face. It was the first since the evening. "Apology accepted. You're forgiven."

Harry returned the smile and pressed another kiss on her hand.

For the first time in the evening, the mood lightened up.

"To make things really clear," added Harry with gravity. "I've never liked anyone else."

"That's nice to know," said Hermione, chuckling. "Anything else?"

"One last thing," said Harry, grinning. "I love you."

The humour from her eyes faded immediately.

"D-did I say something wrongly?" questioned Harry anxiously, touching her face gently. "Hermione?"

She shook her head, lowering her head. "No, I didn't expect you to say that..."

Harry tipped her chin slightly. "I'll have to try that again," whispered Harry huskily, bending forward.

Besotted by the love reflected in his eyes, she unconsciously leaned in. His words were like a gentle caress. "I love you, Hermione."

Their lips tenderly brushed against each other in a sweet kiss.

A bright blue glow enveloped them suddenly. Hermione felt unusually recharged as if she had just awakened from a good kip.

Hermione broke away from their kiss when she realised that his eyes turned vacant.

"Harry! Are you okay?"

Memories were flickering so wildly in his head that she could not interpret them.

She grabbed him by the shoulder and shook him hard.

He responded a few moments later, looking disconcerted. He unconsciously rubbed his temples gently, processing those memories. "What in Merlin's name?" muttered Harry, blinking continuously. He swore under his breath.

"Language, love," reprimanded Hermione lightly. She was staring at him with great concern, wondering about his change of mood.

He climbed to his feet and began to pace like a caged lion.

"Honey, how could I be so stupid?" demanded Harry. He stood up and began to pace. "I walked into his damn plan. I could have prevented him from reviving by plunging my sword into him..."

"Harry?"

He turned to look at her, pain written all over his face. "I'm so sorry, Mione. What I did to you was disgraceful and cruel. Dad ought to have hit me..." But Hermione had forgiven me. He hesitated for a moment, looking at his wife with a pained expression for a brief moment, not understanding how she could forgive him so easily.

The witch finally got the gist of his fury. "You remembered everything?" said Hermione, incredulously.

His head inclined in a nod. Harry looked so severe suddenly.

"It's so reckless of you to use a combination of elemental magic that isn't your forte and healing, Hermione. It will kill you if you're not careful. Please don't try that again," admonished Harry, frowning.

She nodded and remained silent, knowing that Harry was right. Harry drew her into a hug.

Hermione slapped her head suddenly. "How could I be so stupid? To think that all I needed to do was to kiss you!"

"Wait, you're losing me..."

"All we needed to do was trigger our soul bond. I can't believe it's all it takes to return your memory," lamented Hermione, frowning.

He wasn't paying attention to her words any longer. Harry was enchanted by the way the light seemed to illuminate the different planes of her slightly angular face. The warm glow of the flames highlighted the long, dark, curly eyelashes along her almond brown eyes, her adorable little nose, her cheekbones, and sensual lips.

Her world shifted when she felt his lips on hers again. He was kissing her with a demanding insistence that sent a jolt rocketing through her, exploding along every nerve until she was clinging to him, her arms wrapped fiercely around his neck.

She boldly touched her tongue to his lips and her world exploded with the violence of his response. His arms went around her, crushing her firmly to him as his mouth opened over hers, her lips parted in eager anticipation. His tongue plunged into her mouth and their tongues were engaged in a fierce and ardent dance of domination as they stroked and touched each other.

"I miss you," whispered Harry hoarsely when he broke his kiss. He pulled away slightly, giving them a bit of space.

Do you want this?

She opened her eyes to look at her husband when she sensed his hesitance. She wanted him. She needed to be assured that he was indeed alive and by her side.

With great determination, she pulled his head to her and kissed him passionately on his lips. Harry forgot his uncertainty in the fervour of the kiss. He turned his attention to her neck, sliding his lips down her neck, sending shivers of delight up her spine.

He shifted his hands possessively across her back and down her spine, feeling her shiver with pleasure at his touch, then lower to cup her bottom, moulding her closer to his thighs, forging their two bodies into one.

"Shower," said Hermione in ragged breath, breaking the kiss.

Harry chuckled huskily against her shoulder, gently nipping her neck. He climbed on his feet and helped her onto her feet.

Without breaking the kiss, they made their way to the shower.

Using the Marauders' map, Remus and the boys found themselves in a small room in Hogwarts. This part of the school housed the judges

who chose to stay over. He checked the map once more to ensure that the coast was clear.

They took out their wands and waited for Remus's instructions.

They burst through the door after counting to three and found the room empty. There was a bed at the side of the room, a desk by the other wall and a large cabinet. The boys split up to search the room carefully while Remus tried to locate the position of Mr Crouch Senior. The map guided him to a large chest.

Suddenly, the cross with Mr Crouch's name disappeared.

Remus lifted his brows in surprise. "I think he's in the chest. I need a key."

"There are many vials of Polyjuice here," reported Fred, checking the cabinets. He took a vial, opened it and took a whiff. "Phew, it smells bad. It's a different colour too."

"More Polyjuice here," added George, who was peering at a large cauldron of thick muddy substance that was bubbling sluggishly.

Neville managed to uncover a key in the drawer of the desk and handed it to Remus.

He slid the key into the keyhole, glad that it fit in and opened it. When he had opened the chest, a stench hit their noses.

"Lumos."

Light shone out of his wand into the bottom of the chest. There, he spotted Mr Crouch, sitting in the corner, unusually still. He was completely bald, stiff and his skin slightly yellow. There was white frothing in his mouth. His bowels had loosened, creating that awful smell.

"I found him," said Lupin, his face turning pale. "I need you boys to leave now."

The boys heeded his urgent order immediately.

He called Sirius on the watch. "Padfoot, I found him. He's dead."

Amelia finished de-briefing her team in less than ten minutes and dismissed them. Her day was far from over. She needed to complete the reports on the operation, investigation and arrest. Tonks offered to stay behind to help her but she rejected it, knowing that the Auror had worked very hard for the past few months.

Her watch vibrated and she answered it immediately.

"Amelia," said Sirius urgently. "I have bad news. Moony found Crouch dead."

"I'll be there with Tonks. We need to check the scene out," With that, she ended the communication between them.

She took a Portkey to Hogwarts.

"Pup?" asked Sirius, arching his brows when Harry hugged him. Amelia was beside him, looking very tired. They decided to check on the couple after they had settled Mr Crouch's body.

Hermione nodded when Sirius made eye contact with her. A smile stretched across his lips. He tousled his hair playfully.

"You'd me worried for a while," said Sirius. "I'm sorry for my demeanour the last time I met you. I was furious at the way you were treating Hermione."

Amelia was overjoyed that Harry was back.

"I understand," said Harry, a shadow of smile on his face. His fists were clenched for a brief moment and a frown marred his features. When he saw Hermione looking curiously at him, he forced himself to relax.

"How's Cedric?" asked Harry, joining Hermione at the loveseat.

"He's not responding. We were fortunate to have him alive. We're moving him to St Mungo's tomorrow," said Sirius indifferently. "Pomfrey is quite certain that he's not in any danger."

Harry knew that he had to be satisfied with his answer. They needed to talk.

"Pumpkin juice?" offered Hermione, trying to get Sirius comfortable.

He shook his head and loosened his collar. "If you don't mind, I need something stronger." It had been a long and difficult night for everyone. "We've just attended to the body of Barty Crouch Senior."

A bottle of Firewhiskey appeared next to him. Sirius took a good swing from the bottle and handed the bottle to Amelia. She put the bottle to her lips and drank deeply too.

"How did he die?" asked Harry.

"Crouch was poisoned and died just minutes before Remus found him," said Amelia in a clipped voice, setting the bottle aside.

"His son probably poisoned him. He didn't like his old man one bit. I'm quite surprised that he would actually keep him alive for so long."

"It's the best way to smuggle into Hogwarts without raising an alarm. He is, after all, very loyal to his master," answered Hermione, frowning. Harry gave her hand a squeeze of comfort. "He would put aside his disgust and vengeance to finish the mission that his master has given him. Luna was right after all."

Hermione was referring to the time when Luna gave a profile of the loyal servant. It had assisted Amelia and Tonks to narrow the scope down.

Amelia nodded absently at her fair assessment of Crouch Junior. "The Ministry would be arranging a state funeral for him. He was, after all, a high ranking member of the Ministry."

"So Fudge was here?" asked Hermione.

"Yes, he gave me and Professor McGonagall grief over his death. It would be difficult to prove the cause of his death. We could only speculate since Crouch Junior is dead. Fudge did not seem happy that he could not interfere with the matters in Hogwarts."

"He will not let the matter rest," said Harry, thoughtfully.

"Harry, I'm sorry for everything that happened tonight," said Sirius, with profound misery. "We could have prevented it."

"It's not your fault," insisted Harry. "It has already become the past. We cannot afford to dwell in it. He's back and we need all the help we can get."

There was a knock on the door announcing the arrival of Remus and Oswald. They were glad to see that Harry and Hermione looked well. Both of them requested for a bottle of Firewhiskey each, as if they needed a strong drink to wash off the bitter taste the Triwizard competition brought.

"I just spoke to Amos and his wife and they're not handling very well," said Oswald, plopping himself unceremoniously on one of the armchair. "Professor Sprout and Flitwick are with them." He poured for himself a generous glass of Firewhiskey and finished the contents in the glass in one gulp. "They are taking her body back tonight."

Harry could see the question in Oswald's eyes when they briefly meet but he kept quiet.

He turned to Harry. "I believe you know why we're gathered here now. I'm sorry but we need you to tell us what happened tonight." He looked at both of them in the eye. "I meant both of you. It would help you."

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, not knowing where to begin. Harry started from the point when Wormtail met Voldemort. He told them about the death of Jorkins and the information the Dark Lord got from her.

Hermione told them how Crouch Junior had escaped from Azkaban and that Voldemort freed him from the control of his father.

In an afterthought, Hermione summoned Winky.

The house elf appeared promptly before her, her eyes filled with tears. She felt upset but she knew she had to break the news.

Her tone became gentle and soft. "Winky, your previous masters, Mr Crouch Senior and Junior have just died."

Tears began to overflow from her large eyes.

"Winky knows," she sobbed quietly.

"We need to ask you a few questions," said Hermione delicately. "You may choose not to answer, Winky."

It was obvious that she was torn between her loyalty for the Crouch and the Potters. However, she made her choice immediately.

"How did Mr Crouch Senior rescued his son?"

Winky's account collaborated with Hermione's recollection. They also learnt that it was Mr Crouch Junior who set the Dark mark into the sky during the Quidditch Cup finals. Winky nearly tried to hit her head while she recounted, but Harry stopped her.

"May Winky go to old Master's funeral?" asked Winky, in tears.

"Of course," said Hermione kindly.

She summoned Dobby to look after Winky before dismissing both of them.

Hermione also recounted the plan Crouch Junior had carried out to ensure that Harry would be in the hands of his master.

"Wait, so he was not the reason Harry lost his memory?" interjected Amelia.

Harry shook his head. "It was Cho who did it. She was instructed by Voldemort to put some distance between me and you. She gave me a potion to lose those memories and made sure that we kept that distance."

Amelia's eyes narrowed into slits. "Harry, Cho betrayed you and nearly killed you. Why you did even risk your life to bring her body back?" demanded Amelia.

"She pleaded for my life and was killed for it. I believe Voldemort had plans to use her to control Cedric but he discarded her when she became a liability," said Harry, frowning into the distance. Hermione gently massaged his hand. "She might have made a bad decision to serve Voldemort but she was, ultimately, a victim of his."

The adults were speechless.

"We understand," said Oswald finally, looking at Amelia. "It will be difficult to explain her death if we excluded that fact."

"We don't have to," added Hermione suddenly. "I agree with Harry, it is clear that Cho is a victim in this situation. We don't need others to know how she had assisted Voldemort."

"That would work," said Lupin, looking at Amelia. The Head of the Bones family did not seem as if she felt Cho was deserving of their efforts to keep her name untainted. She folded her arms across her chest and changed the subject.

"What happened after you and Cedric touched the Triwizard Cup?"

Instead of telling them the events that transpired at the graveyard, Harry decided to show them the memory. The way Voldemort tortured Harry and killed Cho made them flinch and squirm in their large comfortable seats.

They knew that Voldemort was back but watching the memory sealed the fact that Voldemort was back in their minds. Nothing was more important than get rid of the Dark Lord.

The adults shivered, knowing what it really meant.

The death of Cho affected Amelia badly- she turned ghostly pale. Another question soon surfaced in her mind.

"You were tortured, weren't you? Why do you appear so well?" blurted Amelia, turning to Harry.

It was a change of subject they needed and the adults looked at the young couple curiously.

Harry and Hermione exchanged looks between each other. Neither of them knew really how to explain. "Now that you mention it, I don't feel uncomfortable at all. I think it was our soul bond. We can only speculate. It broke the effects of the potion and recharged Hermione's magical core. Perhaps, it was able to heal my overloaded nerves."

"That's fantastic, Harry," said Oswald, expelling a sigh of relief. "It's not easy to deal with the after-effects of the spell."

Sirius and Lupin nodded vigorously in agreement.

"We'd our fair share of being tortured," said Lupin, sympathetically. "Transforming don't even come close," said Lupin, with an involuntarily shudder. Sirius and Lupin were in an order that was active against Voldemort in the first war, so it was no surprise that they were at the receiving end of the Crucio curse at one point of their lives.

Amelia and Oswald seemed to be consumed by their thoughts. Harry knew that look- they were planning.

"We had an operation just now. I mobilised all the Aurors to sweep the graveyard. I believe that Voldemort was alerted when his wards were destroyed. We found three Death Eaters, stunned. We also

found the cauldron of potion that Voldemort used to revive himself. It feels suspiciously like a set-up because we found nothing else. It was clear that they did not leave the graveyard in a hurry."

"You don't exactly need their testimony to put them behind bars. I believe Harry's testimony would be sufficed," added Sirius. "We need to propose to remove the Dementors or put in another security measure. Most of the faithful Death Eaters are still in Azkaban, alive."

"I would include that in my report that I will be writing. I'll arrange a meeting with a representative of Gringotts too. It's one thing to monitor their accounts and another to freeze it. We need their permission to do so."

Sirius gently massaged her shoulders. "I'll arrange the meet," volunteered Sirius.

"I'll come along," added Harry.

"There is another thing I wished to discuss," said Oswald suddenly. "It's not very important but we need to discuss this. The Dark Lord mentioned that he learnt his potions from books kept in a secret library. In light of tonight's events, it's far too dangerous for it to be ignored..."

Hermione cringed inwardly at the thought of the amount of books destroyed. The sheer amount of knowledge loss made her insides squirm. "Perhaps, there is another way out..."

"It's heartbreaking, I know. It's something that was supposed to be done ages ago but wasn't," said Oswald gruffly. "If I had made my mind to destroy the library earlier, then we won't be facing Voldemort again."

"This task is difficult," added Sirius. "We would have to alert the Ministry and try to contain the damage."

"Or find ways to dismantle the wards," suggested Hermione. "The only real problem is that only the Heads of the Blacks, Gaunts and

Greengrasses would be able to enter the library and that neither could deny access to one another."

"Is it really that important to demolish the library now?" questioned Harry finally. "I doubt that Voldemort would storm into the Ministry with such a small band of followers."

"Only if he's forced to," added Lupin suddenly. "Knowledge is power after all. I don't think he will let us destroy the library. Moreover, it is the only legacy the Gaunts had left."

Everyone grew thoughtful at his words. "We can definitely use that to our advantage. Sirius, I need you to speak to Dumbledore about what we've spoken tonight. He was in charge of the order which fought against him in the previous war. It would be most helpful if he pitched in to help. It's late and we all need our rest."

They nodded absently.

They knew that the confrontation had just begun.

"By the way, your parents are staying at Potter's Mansion, Hermione," said Oswald, rising to his feet.

She blushed. In the midst of everything, she forgot about her parents.

"They weren't in any danger. We were being overly careful," added Lupin, hastily. "It's hard not to be when you've witnessed three deaths in a night." He gave a small smile, as if he was trying to lighten the mood and clapped his hand on her shoulder.

Amelia crushed Harry in a farewell hug. Sirius, as usual, playfully messed his hair up. They needed to head back to begin some preparation.

Harry took her hand and led her to their bedroom. She faltered for a moment, giving him an arched look.

"We need to speak to Althea and Edmund. They might have some idea on Cedric's condition," explained Harry, not understanding why she was hesitating.

"Oh." She pinked slightly, lowering her head.

Harry chuckled brightly, wrapping his arms around her affectionately.

Wordlessly, they entered the House.

Edmund was pleased to see them again. It had been a while since he last saw any of them.

"For a period of time, I thought that the glass bottle was a decoration," said Harry, scratching the back of his head. They updated Edmund about the recent happenings. He gave a sigh when they told him that Voldemort was back.

When they told him about the strange effects of their soul bond, Edmund was mildly intrigued by it. "That's interesting," commented Edmund suddenly, scratching his chin thoughtfully. "Anyway, it's most unfortunate to hear about the plight of your friend."

"Is there a cure for it?" asked Harry.

"Do you know how the killing curse works?" questioned Edmund, twirling his wizard hat.

"It severs the soul from the body," prompted Hermione.

"That's correct. We assume that his condition was caused by a watered-down spell hitting your friend..."

"Some of his soul was detached," concluded Harry in disbelief.

"Ah. Which brings us back to the old debate, what does a soul comprises?" asked Edmund.

Hermione frowned slightly. "I thought you knew better since you created soul-bonds. Let's simplify this a bit. Some believe that man is made up of the body, soul and spirit. The soul is made up of one's consciousness, emotions and thoughts."

Edmund nodded absently.

"Going by that theory, we can deduced that he is out cold because he lost his awareness?" proposed Harry. A strange image of a piece of soul dissipating in the air like smoke appeared in his head. He recalled the time that he destroyed Riddle's diary with the Sword of Gryffindor.

Riddle had screamed and writhed when his essence was destroyed.

There was none of that drama when Cedric collapsed. He grew hopeful. He reckoned that maybe Cedric had his whole soul but he was badly hurt.

"It's not conclusive. The victim of the killing curse dies quietly," added Hermione. "Usually, when the soul is damaged, so is the body. Think of psychosomatic illnesses."

"He's not conscious to show signs of illness," interjected Harry. "His body system is in working condition yet he's still in comatose. It's simply mind- boggling."

"You can drift the case to Althea thought I fear that she might not be of much help."

Althea was glad to see them.

Cedric's condition even boggled the mind of the unruffled Althea, the manifestation of the Healing art. It was true that healing was about the body, spirit and the soul. Healing of the soul was a dangerous art and Althea did not recommend it unless they had no other choices.

"Why not?" asked Harry.

"It is not safe for the healer. You, of all people, would understand. The soul clings to anything like a frightened child. The moment you enter into another soul, you'll never be able to escape from his clutches."

"So a soul-bond would be created?" incited Harry.

Althea shook her head and decided that she would explain the whole situation using sets.

She drew two large circles in the air with her finger and there was an intersection "You could describe the soul bond as the area your soul and your partner's soul intersect, which means that both of you have your own identity, thoughts and emotions."

Harry and Hermione understood that.

Althea erased the first drawing with a swipe of her hand and drew two circles in the air. "However, in the case of delving into the soul of another, your own soul would be consumed by the other." One of the circles entered the other and became a subset, and then the smaller circle disappeared immediately, leaving only one circle.

The teenagers frowned at the sight of only one circle flickering in the air.

Harry brightened suddenly. "Perhaps, they might have a solution for it!"

Hermione and Althea exchanged looks between each other.

It was barely sunrise when Amelia received an urgent summon to the Minister's office. She was still dressed in her nightclothes, sipping coffee and running through the proposal. She thought she had more time to rest before meeting him. Fudge was hardly early.

She sighed and started to prepare for the meeting.

Amelia immediately noticed that the atmosphere was strange when she entered into the large office of the Minister. The wizards working

in the cubicles were unusually absorbed with their work. There was a lack of the usual chaos in the place.

She smoothed down the front of her robes slightly and marched to Fudge's private office. She was admitted immediately.

The small man was sitting behind his desk, absently flipping through her report. His eyebrows drew together in a frown as he perused her report.

"Good morning," said Amelia, after the door clicked shut. "You called for me?"

"Why did you mobilise all the Aurors, Amelia?" questioned Fudge, sharply, clasping his hands. "What in Merlin's name is going on here? Your report did not make sense. Why did you send those people to the Azkaban?"

Her voice was brisk and composed.

"I have indicated clearly that the Dark Lord has returned, with the help of his servant. Those people we have arrested and put in Azkaban are Death Eaters. They were summoned by Lord Voldemort after he was revived and..."

"Don't be ridiculous!" said Fudge, standing on his feet. "They had a history of being Death Eaters but their names were cleared. I've looked at the physical evidence you've gathered last night. It is clear that they were just dabbling in Dark Arts. Besides, Crouch Junior died in Azkaban. There is no way he could revive and help his master. Barty, a high ranking member of the Ministry is dead in Hogwarts. You should be investigating into the cause of his death."

"As I have clearly indicated in the report, it's my belief that his son killed him when he no longer found him useful. His son has been impersonating him since the start of the Triwizard Tournament, using Polyjuice."

"A house elf cannot testify. You don't have enough evidence to prove that Crouch Junior was responsible."

"I have another statement from a student. Crouch Junior revealed his identity and his plot. He was working for Lord Voldemort."

"He's mental!"

"We had two accounts stating that they saw Lord Voldemort resurrected."

His face turned blotchy red from her repeated use of his name.

"YOU-KNOW-WHO CAN'T BE BACK!" bellowed Fudge. He straightened his robes with great dignity. "It's an account from a werewolf. They are not trustworthy. You know better than to accept it..."

"The other account is from a Head of an Ancient House..."

His eyes lighted up suddenly. There was a sly look in his face. "Oh. I know what this is really all about. You're trying to discredit my administration. That won't work..."

"Don't be ridiculous, Fudge, just look at the evidence..."

"Lady Bones, consider yourself terminated as of today for misuse of powers and corruption," said Fudge, in a somewhat calm voice. "The Ancient Houses' attempt to usurp the government and taking full control of the country won't work."

She froze for a moment when the news hit her then laughter began to bubble within her. Soon, she was laughing loudly, casting deportment to the back of her mind.

Fudge was dumfounded by her behaviour.

Suddenly, she calmed down, casually wiping the tears from the corner of her eyes. Her eyes narrowed into slits and she took a dangerous step closer to Fudge.

He backed away immediately, his knees shaking beneath him.

"We have to prepare for a full-scale war," said Amelia in a calm, no-nonsense tone. "It's the only way we can stop Lord Voldemort."

He shuddered at her use of the Dark Lord's name.

"You may have forgotten about the horrors of the war, Fudge, but I haven't. Anyway, the Ancient Houses will take out Lord Voldemort alone if we have to."

"Y-you're m-mental," stammered Fudge under his breath, clutching the edge of his desk tightly.

"You are blinded by power, Fudge. Your ignorance would cost many lives. Lord Voldemort is back and ignoring it won't make him go away."

"Y-You..."

She placed a vial of memories on his desk. "This is a memory from Harry. If I were you, I would remove the Dementors from Azkaban." With that, she left his office to pack.

Luna's dreamily blue eyes widened when she saw Harry and Hermione exit Harry's room. Luna was sitting at one of the armchairs at the sitting room, waiting for Hermione. She stood up immediately, watching the couple closely and quietly.

The couple looked refreshed. Their hands were entwined together and Hermione appeared to be teasing Harry good-naturally.

"Well, I haven't been jogging for a while," said Harry. "You know that you'll lose your stamina if you don't jogged regularly."

"But panting before we finished half a lap, Harry?" demanded Hermione, mirth reflected in her eyes.

Harry chuckled deeply, leaned in and kissed her on her lips fondly. "It was a good idea to exercise though."

"Good morning, Harry and Hermione," said Luna, grinning.

"Oh, it's you, Luna. Good morning." The look of surprise was replaced by a genial smile on Harry's face.

Harry was actually smiling at her instead of avoiding her.

"It's so nice to have you back," said Luna, throwing her arms around him in a quick hug. "Everyone would be so excited to know that you've regained your memories."

"I'm sorry. I've been very mean," said Harry.

"Distrustful," corrected Luna, smiling. She pulled away. "You look fine, Harry."

"Were you waiting for someone?" asked Hermione suddenly.

"I was waiting for you," said Luna, grabbing Harry's arm. "The rest are in the hospital wing. Let's go."

Daphne and Susan were sitting by Cedric's bed, talking in low voices. The boys were not in the hospital wing as Luna had predicted. The girls looked quite flabbergasted to see Harry with Luna and Hermione.

"Daph," said Harry quietly, extending his arms to Daphne in a hug. There was melancholy and compassion in his eyes. She accepted the hug readily, burying her head into his chest. "I'm really sorry," whispered Harry to her hair.

"It's not your fault, Harry," said Daphne, pulling away. "Dad told me that it was unexpected."

"It was," agreed Harry.

"How are you feeling?" asked Susan, looking at the couple.

"Good, we had some rest," said Hermione, watching Harry. His face was void of emotion as he peered at his good friend, Cedric.

Hermione turned to regard her friends. "Did you rest? We have lessons later."

"I'm fine," answered Susan with a tired smile.

"How are Viktor and Fleur?" asked Harry. Hermione updated him about the relationship between Susan and Viktor. Apparently, Viktor was on the verge of asking her out.

"They are physically fine. Viktor was quite livid with himself. He said he was forced to hurt Cedric," said Susan, looking at Harry hopefully.

He could tell that she was hoping that it was false.

"Yeah, I was there. Viktor wasn't acting like himself," said Harry, drawing his hand through his hair haphazardly. "He was probably under the Imperius curse."

"Oh."

He placed his hand on Susan's shoulder. "He was just another tool in the scheme of things."

"How's Cedric?" questioned Hermione.

"They're moving Cedric to St Mungo's. He's physically fine but they have no idea why he has not regained his consciousness," said Daphne.

"Do you remember the Chinese wizard we met in Singapore? We spoke to Cheng Tze about his condition. He promised to get back to us if he has any information," said Hermione. Harry and Hermione spoke to Cheng Tze in the morning and they were quite surprised to know that their theory of soul was quite different from theirs.

There was an unspoken agreement between the couple that neither of them would suggest the other option until they knew more about it.

"How did you regain your memory?" asked Luna.

"You wouldn't believe it," said Hermione, rubbing her temples. "He regained his memory after we kissed."

Daphne and Luna looked incredulous.

"You mean all both of you had to do was to kiss?" demanded Daphne disbelievingly. "It's hard to believe since we spent more than a month trying to find a solution!"

There were several 'pop' sounds and the boys appeared. They looked unusually revitalized as if they had spent some time exercising and were already dressed for the day.

"Harry, old mate, you're here," said Fred with a smile. "Took you this long to realise huh?" asked Fred, staring at Harry and Hermione's intertwined hands. "You were mental to reject her."

Harry brushed his lips past Hermione's knuckles tenderly. "I know. I was mental."

"Nice to have you back, Harrikins," added George, slapping him on his back. He looked at Cedric, who was lying in the bed. "He would be glad too."

Fred pretended to be sobbing. "He would be so proud that both of you got together even though he didn't have the chance to see." His antics earned a death glare from Susan.

"He's not dead," admonished Daphne coolly. "Stop speaking as if he is." Daphne was not at all offended since she knew that they were also worried about him.

"Do you know of Mr Crouch's death?" asked Neville.

"Yes, Sirius told us last night," said Harry. "We believed that his son killed him."

Everyone realised that Harry was going to share with them the events that took place last night, so they got comfortable. Hermione, vigilant as ever, put a few wards to prevent eavesdropping.

It was easier for Harry and Hermione to give an account after talking to the adults about it.

He told them the obstacles he overcome in the task. Since Harry only had knowledge of a fourth-year, it was quite remarkable feat. They became quiet when he shared about walking into the scene of Viktor torturing Cedric with one of the Unforgivables. They laughed at the description of their fight with the Acromantula.

"I can't believe it! Neither of you knew that Acromantula are resistant against magic?" demanded Susan, laughing brightly.

"Well, I guess it's not too late," shrugged Harry. "I encountered Acromantulas in my second year but it never occurred to me that I might meet one again."

"I bet Hagrid was crying when he realised that two of his pets were dead," commented Neville.

The rest of them agreed.

Hermione did her recollection next since it explained many of the mysteries.

Harry knew how tough it was for Hermione to hold her ground despite being ambushed and triumph. He unconsciously rubbed her hand with his thumb as he listened to her tale.

"Wait, so Crouch Junior was not responsible for Harry's loss of memories?" asked Susan suddenly. "So it was someone else?"

Hermione nodded and carried on with her recount. Hermione ghosted over the details of Crouch Junior's death.

Despite that, the teenagers shuddered.

Harry shared the events that took place in the graveyard next.

"What!" demanded Susan loudly when Harry told them that Cho was serving Voldemort.

"So she was the cause? Why did she do that for?"

"For Cedric," answered Harry. "I believed Voldemort promised her some potions."

She snorted. "She can't be that stupid to believe that. At least, she did save Cedric."

"She also tried to plead for my mercy and was murdered for it," added Harry, solemnly. He shared with them the little speech Voldemort made before killing Cho. His voice faltered slightly when he spoke of her death but he soldiered on.

"I'm really sorry," said Susan finally, squeezing Harry's hand. "That was very tactless of me."

Hermione shared with them the plan that Remus came out to save Harry.

"I can't believe that both of you would do that," said Neville, shaking his head. "That was extremely brash of you. You were completely out-numbered."

"And you call me reckless," commented Harry, laughing. He nuzzled the side of her neck tenderly.

"Well, we didn't intend to fight them. Our mission was to rescue them. Amelia was just a few steps behind us, planning to launch a full assault on them."

Everyone grew quiet when Harry finished his tale. They knew that things would irrevocably change with his return.

"So he's really back?" asked Fred, breaking the silence.

Harry and Hermione nodded in agreement, looking at their friends. Their expressions were devoid of emotions.

"Then why, in Merlin's name, are we sitting here looking so depressed? We should be preparing to beat him," continued Fred. "There's a lot to do. We'll have to find the other fragments of his soul and destroyed that idiot for good."

"Count me in, Harry. We'll step up on our practices," added Neville fiercely, standing up. "We won't rest until Voldemort's properly dead."

Harry blinked continuously. This was one of the rare times he saw Neville getting all fired up. Everyone began to express their enthusiasm in their own ways and Harry smiled.

"How about our examinations?" prompted Hermione suddenly and everyone groaned. In the midst of their eagerness, they forgot about their academics. Their end of the year examination was around the corner.

Harry slapped his forehead, knowing that he'd not been studying for any of his subjects. He was dead meat! He had to take both fourth and sixth-year papers. He realised he would also have to deal with his duties as a lord.

"You can't be serious, Hermione?" groaned Fred. It was one aspect of him that would not change. "There are far more important things to do."

"Like?" prompted Hermione, folding her arms.

"Inventing stuffs. George and I had some good ideas," said Fred. "We believe it's going to be very useful."

"You can do that after your examinations. I don't think Voldemort is going on a rampage while you're having your papers," said Hermione, frowning.

Hermione expelled a sigh before adding, "We need to prove that his return is no big deal. We can go on with our lives as per normal."

Opposition to the idea of studying crumbled instantly at her statement.

Harry met her gaze and nodded. He had made the decision to move on that very morning, leaving the horrors and his mistakes behind.

It was only the beginning and they needed the strength to triumph over Lord Voldemort.

The Weasley twins kept quiet and followed the rest of them to the Chambers to study.

A/N: Hi everyone, the update is earlier than usual because I haven't returned to my work. This chapter is especially meaningful to me since I lost someone important recently. Never in my wildest dream would I think that I would be actually grieving when I planned the outline of Harry's fourth year in the beginning. It gave me some sort of closure. Unfortunately, I would be returning to work soon and won't be updating it that quickly. Anyway, I hope you enjoyed the chapter.

Have a blessed week.

Chapter 41

Beta read by Leonineus

The Great hall was buzzing with chatter during breakfast. The last task was the main topic of discussion. The students were still wondering about the whereabouts of Harry and Cedric and the conclusion of the Triwizard Tournament. There was a great deal of speculation about the last task. Many had come to their own conclusion that the Hogwarts champions were transported away last night to have their own private tie-breaker round.

The Ravenclaws looked very subdued that morning.

The doors of the Great Hall were tossed open and Harry and Hermione entered, hand in hand. Their friends surrounded them like a wall, separating them from the other students. Instantly, there was an outburst. The whisperings grew to such a loud volume that it caught the attention of the Professors.

All eyes were turned to them as they walked to the Gryffindor table. Harry, out of impulse, gave her a chaste peck on the cheek. It was clear to all that they were together again.

That fact made several students quite unhappy and most Gryffindors very pleased.

The student's attentions were focused on their companions next. Harry and his companions were blasé about the attention they were receiving. They knew how it was like being a good friend of Harry's.

The word then spread throughout the hall when the students noticed that Cedric was clearly absent.

Harry and his companions settled at their usual place for breakfast. The absence of Cedric was felt by all, and the whisperings of his disappearance did not help matters much. However, they were determined to follow their decision to face the school together.

Professor McGonagall stood up from her seat immediately and approached Harry at the table. "May I speak to you in private, Lord Potter?"

Harry smiled, knowing that she would check on him. He nodded and stood on his feet. He gave Hermione a peck on her forehead before quietly following Professor McGonagall to the side room by the Great Hall.

The room was brighter than he had remembered, with light streaming in from its windows. There was no fire in the fireplace by the side of the room. He recalled the myriad of emotions he experienced when he was selected by the Goblet of Fire and entered this room. This was the room where his journey as a champion had begun and it was appropriate that it should end here.

Professor McGonagall spoke and distracted Harry from his musings.

"How are you feeling? Oswald spoke to me about the events that took place last night."

"I'm fine, Professor. Thank you for your concern." He gave her a reassuring smile, hoping to placate the Headmistress.

The Scottish woman looked at Harry with some anxiety but she made no mention of her worries.

"Minister Fudge wanted to hand you this after the Tournament," said Professor McGonagall, handing him his winnings. "You won because you were leading. There was supposed to be a ceremony but in light of all the events, it was cancelled."

Harry eyed the bag containing his winnings with distaste, much to the amusement of Professor McGonagall, but he took it. "I heard that Mr Crouch's wake will be held today."

"Yes. The Diggories will be holding a quiet funeral for Miss Chang in her family home too. You and your friends have my permission to skip lessons for today if you're planning to attend the funerals."

It would make two wakes to attend.

Harry nodded absently. He hesitated for a moment, not too sure if he should ask. "Professor, do they know what happened in the graveyard?"

"The Diggories know that the Dark Lord killed Miss Chang and his attempt to take Mr Diggory's life," said Professor McGonagall with a hint of gloom.

Harry nodded. "Alright. Thanks, Professor." He carelessly shoved the bag of gold into his pocket.

"I'm sure you know that it has been arranged for Cedric to be moved to St Mungo's this afternoon," said the Headmistress suddenly. "I know you'll be busy searching a cure for him. Feel free to skip a few lessons if you must. Naturally, I expect both of you to do well for your examinations."

The thought of the stern Headmistress giving them leave to ditch classes astounded him.

"Wow, that's quite a surprise, Professor. Don't worry. We will." He left the room to join his friends in the hall.

"Professor McGonagall wanted to hand me the winnings," said Harry, answering their unvoiced question that was made plain by the curiosity on their faces. "She has given us the permission to skip lessons so that we can attend the funeral."

"Cedric would be upset to hear that," joked Fred, smiling. "He hasn't beaten you in Quidditch and now he has lost to you in the tournament."

Harry shrugged indifferently, picking a few toast. "Well, I beat him fair and square."

Swooping sounds interrupted their breakfast suddenly, announcing the arrival of the morning mail. Dozens of owls of different species dived from the air, delivering the mail. Hermione anxiously took the

Daily Prophet from the handsome barn owl and glanced at the headline.

"Aunt Am is dismissed from her post as Head of DMLE," announced Hermione, incredulous.

There was a moment of silence as they digested the announcement.

"What?" demanded Susan. She snatched the papers roughly out of Hermione's hands so that she could look at the headlines with her own eyes. It was announced together with the news of Mr Crouch's demise.

Harry and Hermione exchanged looks between themselves. They understood what it meant.

Suddenly, Susan was on her feet. "I need to speak to her. I'll see you later."

Seeing that Susan was so worried, Fred hastily swallowed his goblet of pumpkin juice and chased after her.

"Why did they dismiss her?" asked Neville, baffled. "It's so sudden. Not to mention, Aunt Am is splendid. Granny approves of her being the Head of the DMLE."

"Aunt Am is a threat," said Harry abruptly. "Well, actually, it's just us. Fudge has always viewed us as one to his power since Sirius became the Head of Wizengamot."

"He probably thinks that this is all a set-up and that we're trying to overthrow the government," added Hermione, thoughtfully.

Daphne snorted at the comment. "He's delusional. We practically own the whole magical world already." Everybody there knew that everything in the magical world could come to a standstill if they had desired it. Between the four families, they had Magical Britain by its gullet.

"No, he's afraid. The Ancient House may be united with a pact but they never stood together. We have separate interests. Aunt Amelia is on the verge of marrying Sirius, a first marriage between the Bones and Blacks," explained Hermione, looking at Daphne and Harry meaningfully.

"He's daft in attempting to wage a war with the Ancient Families," commented George, shaking his head in disbelief.

"He has a death wish," said Daphne dispassionately, tossing the paper aside. "At least no one reported the Triwizard Tournament. Are you attending the state funeral with Harry?" asked Daphne suddenly.

"I can't," said Hermione, lifting her brows in surprise that Daphne would forget that their marriage was still a secret. "Besides, I have other things to attend to." She returned her attention to the article she was reading. It was small and brief article on the three men found in the graveyard. The Wizengamot had imprisoned them for the practice of dark magic.

Daphne gave her an arched look, knowing that Hermione was hiding something from her. After a while, she turned away from her, choosing not to pursue it.

"I'll be attending it with my father. It would be quite interesting at the memorial service putting Sirius and Fudge in the same room." The corner of her lips lifted in a smirk.

"Can I attend?" demanded George immediately, his eyes sparking with excitement.

"You need to be careful," said Hermione, ignoring George and gesturing to the short article. "Look, it's clear that Fudge is meddling."

Harry and Daphne exchanged looks between themselves.

The members of the four Ancient Houses chose to attend the wake of Mr Crouch together. They looked forbidding and unapproachable, dressed in black robes. Amelia even wore a hat with a veil that partly shadowed her face.

Their attendance ended all quiet conversation in the large state room where the funeral was held. It was a first for the Heads of the Ancient Families and their scions to attend an event together. The room seemed to be holding their breath when they approached the coffin and offered their respects.

Some of the members working for the Ministry knew that Mr Crouch's death was connected to the Ancient Houses, though the details of his death remained sketchy. They remained as the only ones in the room who knew the true story.

Harry lowered himself to the height of Winky and encouraged her to pay her respects. He gave her a white rose he conjured. Winky looked fearfully around the room, noticing that she was getting a lot of attention from the other wizards. She clutched the white rose close to her chest, fidgeting.

"No one's going to hurt you. Go say your farewells to Mr Crouch," repeated Harry gently, lightly steering her towards the coffin.

She mustered some courage and walked up to Mr Crouch's coffin. With great grief, she laid the white rose on the coffin.

Tears began to flow down her face, unchecked.

The rest of the members of the Ministry and the media watched on, amazed and outraged that a disgraced house elf would forget its place and pay her respects to an esteemed wizard. Yet, none dared to object, especially when she was encircled by the members of the Ancient Houses. Even, the young scion of the Bones family was by the House elf's side, comforting her. There was nothing they could do to express their disapproval.

Sirius pulled Amelia closer as they stared at the coffin together.

"He dedicated his life to his work," commented Amelia quietly, looking at the coffin. "It was no secret that he lived and breathed his work. He used to be my role model when I was an Auror."

Sirius lifted one of his brows questioningly.

"Until I lost most of my family," continued Amelia, looking at Sirius. "I was reminded that there were things far more important than my career." He smiled when Amelia looked meaningfully at her niece who was speaking to Daphne in a low voice. "The career used to mean so much to me, not anymore."

"I'm glad that you're alright," said Sirius finally, taking her hands into his. "You're right. There are far more important things than the Ministry. When I heard that you were dismissed, I decided to move up my plans."

Amelia arched her brows enquiringly.

"What plans?"

Sirius smirked, brushing his lips across her engagement ring. "I have the permission of the future Head of Bones too."

Amelia could not help but laughed.

Fudge, decked in black, entered the room with Malfoy and another lady. Upon closer observation, the witch looked like a toad- her figure flat and flaccid. She eyed them with distaste.

The Minister for Magic looked troubled when he realised that the four Heads of the Ancient Houses were in attendance. Hesitantly, he approached them.

Sirius stiffened as he watched the Minister for Magic approached them. Amelia squeezed his arm gently, as if warning him to curb his temper.

Fudge regarded the youngest head with a fatherly smile. "Congratulations on winning the Triwizard competition, Lord Gryffindor. Not that you exactly need one thousand Galleons." He winked at the young lord.

"Thank you, Minister," said Harry graciously. He felt Oswald place a hand firmly on his shoulder, almost paternally.

"Lord Greengrass, what a nice surprise to see you again," said Fudge, with a smile that never reached his eyes. "What are you doing here? I didn't know that you were close to Barty." He absently gestured to the coffin.

"We were acquaintances. Barty has always been a high-ranking officer in the Ministry. You can't expect us not to attend," said Oswald with a smile. "Besides, Amelia used to work with him too."

Fudge gave Sirius and Amelia a brief glance before returning his attention to Oswald.

"What are you really here for?" demanded Fudge, dropping into a furious whisper. "I know of your plans to take over the government."

"You know it's preposterous," said Oswald in an even voice. "We're too busy to interfere with the Ministry. I can't believe that you would dismiss Amelia due to that."

He paled. "I'm the Minister for Magic. I can dismiss my Heads if they are not performing."

"Who would buy that? Everyone knows how hard Amelia has worked for the Ministry," interrupted Sirius heatedly, inching dangerously closer to the Minister.

His face turned into a darker shade of plum.

"You're just upset that the witnesses were not affiliated to You-Know-Who and that your plan of causing a public panic has failed," snapped Fudge in a harsh whisper, glaring at Sirius.

"The Minister for Magic has the right to choose his people, Sirius," rebuffed Amelia, giving Sirius's arm another squeeze. The jaws of Sirius clenched and unclenched. Noticing that Amelia was looking pleadingly at him, he expelled the breath that he was holding and kept silent.

Turning to look at Fudge, Amelia added, "We had already predicted that we won't get anything out of those suspects when we captured them last night. He needs more time to prepare..."

"You've done enough, Am," interrupted Oswald, looking at Amelia warningly. It was a look to remind her not to waste her breath on him. He turned to regard the Minister. "We've given you all the proof we have, and we respect your decision. It is a misunderstanding. We are only interested in forming allies, not new enemies, Cornelius," spoke Oswald smoothly. "You would have to excuse us; we've other important matters to attend."

Winky was by Harry's side immediately, ready to take the teenagers to their next location.

Fudge nodded and straightened his robes with trembling hands.

Sirius halted before the Minister and pulled Amelia closer to him. There was mirth reflected in his eyes. "I owe you thanks, Cornelius. If you didn't dismiss Amelia, she probably won't have me. After all, she's always so busy that she doesn't have time for her own personal life, just like her mentor." He glanced at the coffin meaningfully and grinned. "Good luck. You'll need all the luck you can get, if you're going to find replacements half as good as either of them."

With those words, they parted.

They attended Cho's funeral next since the Diggories were quite close to them. The Diggories were quite torn by grief since they saw Cho as a surrogate daughter. Daphne wrapped her arms around Brenna Diggory as she sobbed openly at the sight of her coffin.

Amos was unusually quiet, staring at Cho's coffin with blank eyes.

They chose to hold her burial in the grounds of the old mansion of the Changs. She was buried together with her departed parents in a quiet ceremony.

It came to their realisation that the home of the Changs was next to the old mansion of the Crouch. Cho, in her grief, had probably met Voldemort when he came to look for his loyal servant and chose to work for him. Voldemort was nothing but persuasive and charming if he needed to be.

They returned to Hogwarts after the burial since they were planning to move Cedric to St Mungos. The healers were at the hospital wing when they returned, checking Cedric again. Madam Pomfrey was assisting the healers and providing the details they needed. The Healer in charge of Cedric was a severe looking wizard with grey hair. He ran his wand over Cedric a few times and recorded his findings.

Hermione, Fred and George were in the Hospital Wing, watching over the proceedings.

The healer had given him intravenous drips. "He's not eating, so he needs his nutrients and liquid," answered one of the healers when they questioned him.

"I'm Healer Fraser," introduced one the Healer when he noticed the adults. Grey speckled the sides of his ebony black hair, giving him a distinguished look. He was a bespectacled man with a small stature. His eyes betrayed his surprise at seeing the Heads of the four Ancient families. "I'm his principal Healer. His condition is stable. We will be moving him shortly."

Some of the healers carefully levitated him to a stretcher and strapped him into it. They performed a check on his vitals once more. The Diggories, along with Daphne, were watching them work like hawks.

"That's nice to hear. Do you have any experience dealing with such cases?" asked Oswald, looking at Healer Fraser.

"No, my Lord," admitted the Healer openly. "To date, there is only one recorded case of someone surviving the killing curse," he continued, staring at Harry meaningfully.

Harry tugged at his collar slightly, feeling unusually uneasy - He felt like a specimen under the Healer's measuring gaze.

The healer turned to look at Oswald. "However, my team and I have been researching on the killing curse for nearly a decade and we will do our best to help him."

Hermione's eyes gleamed suddenly. "You're Healer Nolan Fraser?"

"Yes, I beg your pardon, you're miss...?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm Hermione," said Hermione. "I read your book. You'd this interesting theory about Avada Kedavra. You mentioned that it operates by withdrawing all electrical charges from the body. That instantly shuts down the nervous system, causing total cellular apoptosis, and thus immediate death without any evident injury."

"Yes, that's correct," said Healer Fraser, nodding. He waited patiently for her to get to the point.

"I think that your theory has some flaws," continued Hermione, briskly. "Let's assume that some electrical energy is withdrawn due to a watered down killing curse, we would expect some sort of organ or system failure due to cellular apoptosis but none of that happened. His body is in fine working condition despite being in comatose. One would even liken his condition to a Dementor-kissed victim, would you not agree? "

Hermione had a better understanding of the curse due to Harry. She treaded carefully, realising that she could not reject his theory openly without bringing Voldemort into the picture.

Hermione had Healer Fraser's full attention now. His face reflected a mix of outrage and surprise.

Harry stepped in, placing his hand on his wife's shoulder. "Let the good Healer do his job first," said Harry, smiling. "He's the leading Healer in matters regarding the killing curse. We can think of other alternatives if he can't help us."

The healer frowned, wondering at the mental capabilities of this teenage girl before him.

"Blimey, if Cedric survives, he'll be the other 'boy-who-lived'" added Fred in awe, nudging Harry. "You'll have competition, Harrikins."

Susan rolled her eyes at his remarks.

"Y-yes, I'm sure. It would help our research greatly if you would volunteer to be examined, my Lord," said Healer Fraser, regaining his composure.

"That won't be possible," said Harry, flatly. "I believe your patient is waiting for you?"

He looked around the hospital wing and realised that the other healers had taken Cedric to the ward.

"It will benefit the research. It will also help your friend," said Healer Fraser, shrugging. "It's your call." He turned to look at Hermione, as if he wanted to speak to her but he decided against it. He excused himself, tossing the Floo powder into the flames and was transported away.

All of them left the Hospital Wing for the marriage quarters for a private lunch.

Dobby and Winky outperformed themselves by preparing a near banquet lunch, in the true house-elves-of- the-Potter-Household standard. They set the dining table within half an hour. Their speed and their attention to detail amazed the diners even though they were quite used to opulence.

Fred and George whistled at when they saw the fine porcelain ware and expensive silverware on the table.

"Do you usually dine in such style?" asked Fred, wide-eyed.

It was a strange question to ask since they usually take meals together.

"They're just overjoyed. It has been months since they prepared a meal for us," said Harry, sitting his wife. Hermione gratefully reward him with a peck on his cheek. Fred and George took a leaf from his book and seated Susan and Daphne respectively.

The first dish was served immediately and the occupants around the table began tucking in. The conversation around the table was light, centring on everyday matters. Fred and George were discussing about their invention in low voices.

"What was the deal with the trial today?" asked Harry suddenly, remembering the conversation between Sirius and Fudge. "I thought you knew that Avery, Nott and Crabbe are Death Eaters."

The table grew quiet suddenly.

There was a light 'clink' sound when Sirius set his cutleries down. He dabbed the corner of his mouth with his napkin.

"We couldn't prove it without revealing our own investigations. They openly admitted that they had gathered in the graveyard to brew banned potions. We also examined their memories and they matched their testimonies so they were sentenced to Azkaban for the practice of Dark Arts."

"It's good that things worked out this way. We don't need another enemy, Sirius. I was worried about dragging Harry into the mess with his testimony," said Oswald, scratching his chin thoughtfully.

"Besides, we're not ready to handle the panic that would occur if the public learns of the return of Voldemort," said Amelia. "We suspected that it would turn out this way. It smelled like a set-up."

"So we reacted exactly as he had planned?" questioned Harry. He frowned at the thought of it.

"Most likely," replied Oswald. "Your examinations are around the corner, are you prepared for it?"

There was a bit of grouching from the sixth years and the fourth years since the Professors were constantly reminding them about their upcoming national examinations. The students were sorely in need of practice.

"We've another year," grumbled George. "I don't even understand the fuss about it."

"Yeah. You don't really need NEWTs for everything," lamented Fred, idly playing with his silverware.

They continued to linger around the dining table even though they had finished their lunch.

Harry felt Sirius's stare while he was conversing with Fred, so he turned to look at him. When his godfather realised that he had caught his eye, he jerked his thumb inconspicuously to his study room. Fred was now chatting with Hermione about his latest invention and everyone else were too busy talking to notice.

Harry caught his meaning straightaway and excused himself discreetly. He grabbed his goblet and headed into the study. His desk was piled with the things he needed to do for the day. Hermione had attended to his duties when he had lost his memories.

He sat at his desk, flipping through some of his things. Sirius hardly initiates a private conversation between them and he was curious what his godfather had to say. After a few moments, he heard Sirius entering his study and he set his folders aside.

"So, pup, how are you?" asked Sirius, leaning on the wall, facing him. "I didn't have the opportunity to talk to you just now."

"I'm fine," replied Harry, smiling. He stood up and took his goblet. "It was a long day." He took his time refilling it as he waited patiently for his godfather to continue.

"Are you and Hermione alright?" asked Sirius, tucking his hands into his pockets and eying his godson closely.

His eyebrows arched in surprised. It was a strange question to ask since they were together now.

"We're fine."

They were alright but it felt like a lie. He paused midsentence and drew his hand through his hair.

"I don't know," said Harry finally.

His godfather patted him on his shoulder. "It is OK, Harry. There's only me and you in this room. Let it out, Harry."

His godfather's gentle tone opened the floodgates of a particular dam of emotions he wanted to keep it tightly shut. Sirius took the goblet from him and sipped his drink.

"I understand why breaking up a soul-bond couple was seen in the same light as murder," said Harry gruffly, balancing on the balls of his feet. Like a caged tiger, he began to pace around his study.

Sirius chose not to comment.

"It's just cruel. It's a fate worse than death." He balled his hands up into fist and punched the wall, releasing some of those frustrations. The action skinned the knuckles of his fist but he was too frustrated to notice. "I know she has forgiven me but I promised myself not to hurt her."

Sirius's eyes reflected empathy, but he kept silent.

"I hurt her when I returned my ring. I saw the photograph I had of that memory and the ring reminded me how lacking I was. I remembered the reason why I gave her that ring on her birthday- I wanted to make it public that we're serious about each other. Well, it drove her mad."

Harry shook his head at his own stupidity, tucked his hands into his pockets and lowered his gaze.

"I'm glad that you know what a pain-in-the-arse you were," said Sirius teasingly, chuckling. "I'm not going to sugar-coat my words- You were treating Hermione dreadfully." He noticed that that frank comment got Harry's attention. "It's normal that you feel terrible about it especially since Hermione let you off the hook easily. It's normal for you to make mistakes, Harry. It's normal to get angry and upset over it but it's in the past."

Harry looked at him.

"Don't let your past mistakes affect your relationship with your wife, Pup. If that happens, it'll be downright ridiculous."

Harry nodded absently, sipping from his goblet.

"Let me give you an advice, Harry. Communication is very important in a relationship. Talk to her about it, Hermione would like to know about it."

He set his goblet aside after thinking through things.

"I'll speak to Hermione later. Thanks for listening to me. It really helped," smiled Harry. He felt figuratively lighter.

Sirius playfully caught him in a headlock and messed up his hair. "It's my pleasure, pup. By the way, no one blamed you for being nasty to them."

"I know," said Harry quietly.

"What's with the upset face!" exclaimed Sirius, thoroughly messing his hair. He only released his godson after ensuring that his hair was sticking in odd angles. Harry let out a low growl since he took a long time to tame his unruly mop of hair.

"Oh yes, I wanted to tell something important. Amelia has agreed to move up the wedding, so we're going to get married by July," said Sirius, grinning from ear to ear.

"That's great," said Harry absently, trying his best to smoothen his wild hair and mentally counting the time they had to prepare for the wedding. His eyes widened in shock. "Wait! That's just a few months away. What's the hurry?"

Sirius turned away, shrugging. "We're not getting any younger. Besides, Voldemort's back. You don't know how much time you left." Sirius grew solemn and pensive, very unlike his usual carefree self.

"Aunt Am's not pregnant right?"

Sirius glared at him, much to the amusement of Harry.

Harry nimbly dodged his grab and exited out of the room, howling with laughter.

Sirius made the same announcement when he returned to the dining room. It was met with excited squeals and great deal of enthusiasm. Harry smiled when he saw Hermione throw her arms around Amelia, together with Susan and Luna in careless abandonment.

Susan was the happiest, squealing and jumping up and down as she embraced her aunt. That kind of enthusiasm was infectious and soon Amelia was smiling too.

"Aunt, we've got some plans to show you! We've been planning it since Sirius proposed to you," said Susan eagerly, grabbing her aunt's hand.

Chaos ensued soon after. The girls dragged a screaming Amelia off to the sitting room so that they could share with her the plans that they had come out months earlier.

It was hilarious to see the tough Amelia squealing in fright as her niece and Hermione dragged her away. Fred and George cracked up with mirth, their faces bright red and clutching their stomachs.

"Help me, Sirius!"

Sirius waved at her eagerly, with a large smile plastered on his face. "Have fun, my love. I'll see you later."

Fred and George hastily excused themselves when the girls left, when they realised that they had classes in five minutes. Only the Oswald, Sirius and Harry remained in the quarters.

"I don't even think we actually need wedding planners," commented Sirius when Amelia was out of sight, amused. He was relieved that he was not involved in the wedding planning mayhem. "I'm so glad that Moony isn't here."

"Now that you mentioned him, where is he exactly?" asked Harry, sipping his drink. His cheeks hurt from all that laughing.

"He's trying to make contact with the other werewolves," said Oswald, pushing several buttons of his watch. "He left last night. I don't think we'll hear from him soon." He stood up suddenly. "There are things that I need to attend to so I shall leave now. Don't try jumping over the broom. Take my advice and get a wedding planner. I'll owl you a reliable wedding planner. It's the first wedding between the two Ancient Houses so don't mess it up. I guess this is the time I'll have to do what Edgar bid me to do."

Sirius gave him an enquiring stare.

Oswald glared at Sirius, suddenly emanating a terrifying amount of power. The pressure in the room dropped suddenly and there was a sudden gale within the room. Harry could feel the raging wind whipping his hair wildly.

"Don't you dare ill-treat Amelia or you'll pay dearly for it," said Oswald menacingly. "Do you understand?"

His eyes grew as large as twin saucers. Sirius swallowed visibly. Noticing that Oswald was waiting impatiently for an answer, he nodded his head with a great deal of enthusiasm.

"Good. I'll probably see you at Platform Nine and Three-Quarters, Harry," said Oswald smoothly, his aura changing in a blink of an eye.

He was now the affable elder, with a gentle smile on his face. It sent shivers down his spine. The freak wind died down as sudden as his change in demeanour.

A house elf appeared and took Oswald away.

"That was quite dramatic. It is a traditional ritual," said Harry, his eyes twinkling with amusement. He had his suspicions that that was all staged to get the point through Sirius's thick skull. "Though I don't remember Dad warning me against mistreating Hermione before our marriage."

Sirius let out a warning growl as Harry chuckled.

He took pleasure at seeing his godfather being so subdued.

"What was your wedding like?"

Sirius was now looking at him inquisitively.

"Wonderful," said Harry, recalling his quick wedding. "It's simple so it cannot be the kind you can have," said Harry cheekily. "Take Uncle Os's advice and get a wedding planner. It's, after all, going to be the wedding of the century. You do know that both of you have to invite a lot of people lest you risk offending them?"

He grew pale. He pressed his palms to his face. "I think I'm getting the cold feet now."

They decided to play a game of Wizard Chess to pass time. Sirius had little patience with the game. In the middle of the game, he tossed his strategy out of the window and began a suicidal rampage. He began devouring Harry's chess pieces with little thought to the consequences.

"Hey! You know that you're sacrificing your queen right?" asked Harry incredulously when Sirius recklessly ordered his queen to take Harry's pawn. "You'll be left with only your king."

"So?" demanded Sirius with a feral gleam in his eyes. The move was made and there was no turning back.

Harry sighed as he ordered his sniggering pawn to take his queen.

Harry naturally won the game and he burst out laughing the moment the game was over. Sirius nearly choked the tickled boy with his headlock.

Sirius, realising that it was getting quite late, freed his fiancée from the clutches of the girls so that they could have some quiet time together. Even if they were hiring a wedding planner, he was certain that there were things that Amelia and he needed to talk about. They exchange farewells before departing.

Harry was quite surprised to see Luna with them. Her lessons had ended early so she joined the girls for the discussion.

"Had fun?" asked Hermione, lifting her brow enquiringly when Harry entered the sitting room. "I could hear you laughing quite loudly."

He grinned and pecked her lips in a chaste kiss. "Sirius has suicidal tendencies when he plays chess."

Hermione laughed heartily and wrapped her arms around his waist possessively. The laughter in her eyes died when she stared into his eyes. They stood there, gazing into each other eyes, simply mesmerized.

"We get the idea," teased Susan, standing up. Luna and Daphne were also on their feet. "We'll see you tomorrow at the Chambers."

She released Harry immediately, letting her arms drop to the side when she noticed how pensive Daphne became. A gracious smile appeared on Harry's face as he took a step back. The last thing they wanted to do was to make the girl feel uncomfortable.

Hermione tucked her stray fringe behind her ear. "Do you know when Viktor and Fleur would leave?" questioned Hermione suddenly.

"I'm not too sure," said Susan, raising her brows in surprise. "Why?"

"Maybe we could arrange to play a game of Quidditch. The weather is turning warmer and I remembered Viktor expressing an interest to play Quidditch with us before he returns back to Bulgaria."

Harry turned and stared at his wife with scepticism.

"Who are you?" demanded Harry. "Hermione will never propose to have a Quidditch match on her own accord. Who presided over our wedding?"

"Don't be silly, Harry," chided Hermione, swatting his arm. It caused him to chuckle deeply. "I didn't say anything about playing."

"You have to," said Harry in outrage. "We're lacking in players." He kept quiet when Hermione glared at him.

"I'm sure he'll agree to it," said Susan, looking at Daphne with concern. "It is a good idea."

"It's," agreed Daphne quietly. She looked slightly distracted.

Hermione took her hands gently. "Don't worry. Cedric will be fine. We will find a way." It suddenly occurred to Hermione that she had never seen Daphne cry. She was emotionless when she learnt of Cedric's news, she was unaffected when Pomfrey could not help him and she was detached when Healer Fraser did not seem too optimistic about his condition.

"Sure, we'll spend whatever time to search for a cure," agreed Luna, wrapping her arms around Daphne. Susan joined in the embrace, hugging the other side of Daphne. Even Neville chose to express his support by putting a hand on her shoulder.

The corners of Daphne's lips lifted in a small smile.

"I'm really fine," coughed Daphne finally, averting her head and dabbing the corners of her eyes inconspicuously "I know he'll be OK. Thanks."

"You don't have to be embarrassed, Daph," teased Susan lightly. "It's only us."

"Oh hush," said the Ice Queen sternly.

Everyone chuckled.

Luna took Daphne's hand and led her towards the exit. "We've to leave, I'm famished," said the Ravenclaw. The rest of them followed along after bidding farewell, leaving Harry and Hermione alone.

Harry wrapped his arms around her when Hermione flung herself on him. He chortled slightly when she nearly threw him off balance. Her arms snaked around his waist and she buried her head into his chest.

He was aware of her anxiety from being apart from him and rubbed her back soothingly.

The scent of her mate, coupled with his strong rhythmic heartbeat calmed her. She let out a sigh, contented to be in his arms.

Harry ran his hands along her sides comfortingly, enjoying their close contact. He felt completed, just holding her in his arms.

"I miss you, Harry," whispered Hermione, rubbing her cheek against his chest. He gave her a firm squeeze, expressing the same sentiments.

"I know," said Harry in a husky voice, chuckling. "It's quite insane."

He gently nuzzled the side of her neck.

"Hermione, we didn't celebrate Valentine's day together," whispered Harry, kissing the top of her head. "I want to make it up to you."

Harry pulled away from her suddenly so that he could see her reaction.

"Let's go on a date."

Hermione smiled and dipped her head in a nod.

With a large smile plastered on his face, he led her into the House.

Harry wanted to cook for her but his plan was foiled when Hermione flatly refused. The young couple had never prepared meals together since they only cooked in special occasions for each other. Due to her insistence, he allowed her into his kitchen so that they could prepare the meal together.

It turned out to be the worse decision he ever made.

They stood next to each other, along a long kitchen counter.

Hermione would frequently brush against him as they did the preparation, distracting him from his task. He dismissed it initially, blaming the constant contact on the lack of space.

Sound of chopping filled the kitchen as she cut the vegetables into bite- size pieces.

His brow winged upwards when he noticed that she chose to lean against him to reach for a utensil on his side instead of asking him to pass it several times. Her actions allowed him a feel of her body pressing against him.

He couldn't help but stare longingly at his wife, his mind occupied with her.

"Hermione..."

It came out embarrassingly like a groan more than a question.

"Yes?" questioned Hermione innocently, stretching across him to put the knife and the chopping board into the sink.

Harry took a deep breath, reining his base desires. He unbuttoned his collar and fanned himself. He mopped his brow with the back of his sleeves.

He felt her brushed against him again when she walked to the stove to check on the pasta.

"N-nothing," muttered Harry, turning a bright red. He did his best to focus on the meat that he was marinating with red wine instead of his beautiful wife. Hermione wouldn't tease him that way in the kitchen.

Hermione grinned mischievously.

When he felt her hands ghosted past his derrière, he lost control of his lust. The spoon he was holding dropped with a resounding 'clank.'

He pinned her onto the wall perpendicular to the counter and kissed her ardently. His hands slid under her shirt along her bare stomach, causing her to tremble with pleasure.

"Harry!" yelped Hermione when she felt his lips on her neck nipping. "Not here," said Hermione breathlessly, putting her hands on his chest and pushing him away. "No hanky-panky in the kitchen, remember?"

Her firm tone cleared the haze his lust had formed in his mind.

Harry was panting hard. He racked his hands through his hair in frustration as he took large gulps of air. He bowed his head in embarrassment at his lack of self-control.

Hermione straightened her robes before heading past him to the stove to stir the sauce.

He was about to apologise when he sensed a hint of smugness from his wife. His eyes widened in surprise. She was teasing him! Two could play the game.

He leaned closer to her while inspecting on her sauce so that he was pressed onto the back of his wife. Almost casually, he whispered into her ear, "I think it's time to let it simmer. We can add the vegetables soon." His warm breath fanned across her ear, causing her to shiver involuntarily.

"H-Harry..."

"Yes, angel?" asked Harry, looking innocent.

"N-nothing," said Hermione, slightly flushed. She was mindful of her racing pulse at his gaze. She chided herself inwardly since there was nothing sensuous at the way he was looking at her.

She shook her head and returned her attention back to her task. She did not even notice the smirk on his face when she began fanning herself.

Harry didn't think that he could enjoy preparing a meal that much.

The meal was prepared under an hour and they decided to enjoy it by the lake. The clear night sky was painted with a multitude of gleaming stars. It was stunning and he had never seen so many stars in his life. Harry was certain that most of the stars did not exist in the real world and that Ades was trying her hand to enhanced the atmosphere. The large lake sparkled with the splendour of the stars.

The distant sound of water flowing down the nearby waterfall added to the charm of the spot they picked. He remembered that they celebrated their Valentine's Day in this very spot.

The salivating aroma of their pasta hurried the young couple to tuck in.

"You did it on purpose, didn't you?" demanded Harry with arched brows after savouring a bite. It was after all the first meal that they prepared together. A soft smile graced his face when he realised that the pasta turned out to be quite tasty.

Hermione shrugged indifferently, spearing her beef ball with her fork.

Harry chuckled, amused by her playful side. "I didn't know you can be quite a tease, honey. You know we agreed on that rule because we don't want any mishaps in the kitchen."

"I didn't do anything," insisted Hermione. Her eyes were twinkling with mischievousness.

Harry reached across the table to take her hand.

The mirth in his eyes was replaced with adoration.

"You're so amazing, angel," murmured Harry sincerely, gazing into her eyes.

Starlight whitewashed her skin and she looked stunning. Her skin looked silky and porcelain fair in the pale light and he was curious to know if it was as smooth as he thought. Entranced, he ran his finger along her hand, relishing the softness of her skin.

Hermione smiled bashfully and intertwined their fingers together.

The mood grew light between them. The night was still young and they wanted to take things easy. They were contented that they were sharing a quiet meal together.

"Harry, can I ask you a question?" asked Hermione, lowering her gaze.

"You know you can ask me anything," said Harry encouragingly and he gently rubbed her hand with the pad of his thumb.

"What would you do if our soul-bond could not restore your memories?"

He frowned slightly in thought, before a smile made its way to his face. "I will learn to be a better husband to you and a friend to our companions. After the incident at the graveyard, I came into terms with my feelings for you. I like the idea of being married to you and I found myself wanting to spend the rest of my life with you."

He was kneeling before her, with a besotted look on his face.

She lifted her head, smiling at him weakly. Hermione had given him the opening he required to have that conversation with her.

He raked his hand through his hair.

"I was upset and angry when I regained my memories. I couldn't believe that I would dare to hurt you. When we were married, I promised that I will always be with you. I broke that promise." He gently rubbed her wedding band.

"You weren't yourself, Harry. It's inevitable that we'll hurt each other in some way, no matter how much we endeavour not to," said Hermione thoughtfully. She hushed him by putting her finger on his lips. "I'm glad you chose to talk to me about how you feel. I admit it was difficult for me then and I'm glad that it's finally over. We're together now." She entwined their fingers together.

"Thank you, Hermione," whispered Harry, brushing his lips tenderly across her knuckles.

Hermione gently pecked him on his lips. "It's amazing. You fell in love with me again," whispered Hermione to his lips.

"You're amazing, Hermione. I couldn't stop myself from falling head over heels for you."

"I'm just glad that we talked," said Hermione. Her smile was so radiant that he found himself grinning at her. Her eyes widen for a moment.

"Mione?" asked Harry, climbing on his feet.

Hermione was frantically searching her pockets. She expelled a sigh of relief when she finally found it in one of her pockets.

He froze when he saw his gold Celtic ring in her hand.

He arched an eyebrow.

"You've been carrying this ring with you?"

Hermione nodded and stood up. She took his left hand with her hand, her Celtic ring gleaming. With great gravity, she slipped the ring into his finger. "I want to make a lasting commitment so that everyone can see that I'm devoted to you." Embarrassment tinged her cheeks pink. "I will always love you, Harry, no matter what you become."

Her tone turned slightly teasing suddenly. "You can't complain that I haven't put a mark on you."

Harry chuckled brightly and drew her into his embrace. "No, I can't." The mirth from his eyes faded and was replaced with adulation as he pulled away and gazed into her eyes. "I love you too, Hermione," whispered Harry, his warm breath fanning across her face.

Her hands slid up his back to his neck and applied a gentle pressure. Their lips met in a feathery kiss that sealed the promise they made to each other.

They spent the night in the House.

Harry and Hermione met the rest of their friends in the Chamber the next morning. Hermione had redrawn a new schedule for them. They warmed up with a usual jog around the grounds since the weather permitted. Fred naturally teased Harry when he could not catch up with them. The others had kept themselves fit by exercising constantly. They surprised Harry with their improvement in their fighting abilities.

They decided to practice a series of disorientation charms next before pairing off for a mock battle.

Hermione's brief clash with Crouch Junior imprinted the importance of constant vigilance in her. She also learnt not to underestimate her opponents. Those Death eaters could do some real damage without a wand even if they had lost their spare wand. It was an issue they had to look into since their companions would be sitting ducks if they had lost their wands in a battle.

After a brief shower, they had their breakfast in the Chambers. They retreated to the library of Chamber to search for any information

about the killing curse. Harry and Hermione, on the other, were looking for books on souls. After spending an hour in the library, they split up for school.

Viktor was excited about having a friendly match so Hermione buckled down to arrange it. Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students were returning back to their own schools in May which gave them enough time to practice for the game. After discussing with Viktor and Fleur, they decided to have a match between students from Hogwarts and the guest schools. As such, they seek for five additional players from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang to form the other team. Fleur agreed to ask the keeper and chaser from her school team while Viktor invited the two beaters and chaser from his school team to play.

Professor McGonagall gave them the green light to use the Quidditch pitch so that the unendorsed teams could practice for the game.

News of the match leaked out and spread through the three schools like a wildfire and by the first week, everyone knew about the upcoming match. It was naturally blow out of proportion. What was supposed to be a private match became a public event. The students spent their time preparing banners and posters. Some of them were using some of the posters of Viktor they had bought from the Quidditch World cup to support the teams.

The professors were quite unhappy about it since it was cutting close to the final year examinations but they were pacified since they would have the opportunity to see a world-class seeker playing in their pitch and it would be the first Quidditch game in which students from different houses would be playing.

True to Hermione's word, she was not playing in the match, opting to run it. There was the logistics to attend to like procuring broomsticks for the players and arranging time slots for the practices. The match was scheduled to be taken place at the end of May, just before the foreign students' departure.

To their surprise, the affair promoted a lot of intermingling between the three schools and among the houses of Hogwarts. Students from all three schools would flock to the Quidditch pitch frequently to watch

the two teams prepare for the game. Those who were unused to fame were quite nervous with all the attention they were receiving.

The more experienced Quidditch players complained at the lack of chance to play in such a rare match and wanted to have trials to form the team with Hogwarts students.

"For the last time, no!" said Hermione briskly when some students pestered her about the trials. "It's not a Quidditch team representing Hogwarts. It's just a team that comprises of students from Hogwarts. It's mental to hold formal try-outs for a friendly match."

The Hogwarts team spent a lot of time planning their strategies and training the inexperienced players. They realised that they would have to rely on their chasers if they wanted to win the match. Harry was a good seeker but he was pitting against an excellent seeker, therefore there was a high chance that he might not be able to catch the snitch.

The Gryffindor and the Hufflepuff teams volunteered to train their school mates for the match, in a rare show of true school spirit. They knew that Luna, Daphne and Neville would be on the losing end since they were up against experienced players and thus came together to impart their knowledge. The Slytherin team even offered the use of their broomsticks for the match, which Hermione had accepted graciously.

It would mean that other than the two beaters and the two seekers, the others would be using a Nimbus 2001. The inexperienced Ravenclaw team had lost their captain recently and thus did not render any assistance.

The chasers and the keepers were in the Quidditch pitch, training Luna, Neville, Daphne and Susan. They had been trained for a week.

Angeline, Daphne and Susan were on their broomsticks, quietly observing the session from the side. Susan had shown remarkable improvement after much training. She was speeding along Alicia, who had the possession of the Quaffle, carefully avoiding the Bludgers that were knocked into her way.

Neville, the keeper, was staring at the incoming chasers intently, readying himself for their attempt to score.

His eyebrows winged up momentarily when Alicia tossed the Quaffle upwards instead of into one of the three large loops. Speeding, Susan caught it nimbly and threw it into the right loop, away from Neville's reach.

It seemed inevitable that she would score. Neville dived thoughtlessly, watching the Quaffle speed into the loop. There was a yell from the stand when Neville's foot connected with the Quaffle. The Quaffle was sent flying away from the loop.

He saved it!

He grinned, punching his fist into the air.

"That was a great catch," remarked Luna, clapping.

"He'll make a good keeper if he continues to train hard," commented Angeline. It was no secret in Gryffindor that Angeline was selected to be the captain next year.

The three chasers were off again, weaving past the Bludgers that Fred and George were hitting in their way, trying to make a score.

The two Gryffindor chasers were clearly on top forms, despite the lack of playing, tossing and passing Quaffles and scoring in such high speed and skill that left the spectators simply breathless.

"He's not bad," said Daphne. To his credit, Neville was handling himself quite well. He had saved at least half of the Quaffles.

"I might even consider taking him on as our keeper next year," said Angeline. "Daph and Luna, you can join Su's team now," said Angeline when she spotted the keeper from Hufflepuff and the burly beaters from Slytherins on the ground. "You're going to play against us," continued Angeline with a fierce grin on her face.

Daphne and Luna groaned inwardly.

Even Fred and George stopped to gape at her announcement.

"Y-you mean we're playing against them?" demanded George, pointing to the other players. "They're mental on the pitch!" He played enough games with them to know their prowess. The keeper from Hufflepuff was as good as their old captain, Wood.

There was an evil gleam in her eyes. "Let's up the stakes, boys. The losing team would have to sing and jog ten rounds around the school with their broomstick."

"It's ridiculous," exclaimed Fred.

"I'm not singing," said Daphne, folding her arms.

"Then beat us. Are you chickening out before you even try?" goaded Angeline, staring at Fred.

It appealed to the competitive side of Fred.

"No! We have a deal."

The others groaned loudly.

The match was spectacular. The players from both teams worked flawlessly with one another despite being from different houses. Naturally, the experienced players from the three House teams neatly creamed them and sent them back crying.

It was quite a preposterous sight watching Daphne, Luna, Susan Fred and George, with mud-stained robes and broomsticks on their backs, jogging around the school, singing tunes from the Weird Sisters loudly. Angeline and Katie were on their brooms, following them to ensure that they held out the side of their deal.

To their mortification, the Creevey brothers took plenty of good shots of that scene.

The other team took the practice sessions as time to build team rapport. They were from different schools and countries so they needed the time to break the ice and overcome the language barrier. It took them a while to understand one another due to their thick accent. However, their common love for Quidditch and mutual desire to trump over the team from Hogwarts united them.

The weather was getting too warm for the Bulgarians to play, since they were used to a cold climate. They had to transfigure their uniform to make them thinner. The French students, on the other hand, were delighted at the change of weather since they would not need to wear a coat any longer.

It was quite amusing to watch them play team building games on the pitch, instead of practising for the upcoming match. Viktor brought with him a lot of strategies and experience. He helped to create the training plan, paying more attention to team building than development of skills since they were experienced players.

Alette, Nikola and Fleur were chasers on their own school team so they were quite formidable and flawless together. The three Gryffindor chasers were very impressed with their play. Broislav and Theodore played beaters for Durmstrang and were very extraordinary. Lisette played keeper for her school and was quite invincible as one.

Occasionally, Susan and Viktor would meet after the practices to talk. It getting quite clear that they were into each other.

Amelia and Sirius were engrossed with their preparation for their wedding in summer. The wedding invitations were delivered a week after they had formally announced it to their family and there was much to prepare, like the wedding reception, the stag and hen do, the clothes in such a short time.

The days soon race past and it was soon May. The excitement grew into a feverish pitch and it was clear that everyone's mind was solely on the game. Hogwarts students cheerfully wished them luck whenever they saw any of members the team compromising of Hogwarts students.

The game was arranged to be held in the dusk so that it would be cooler for the Bulgarians players to play.

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen to the most highly awaited match of the year!" boomed Lee over the teeming pitch. His announcement was met with a resounding applause and loud cheering from the crowded stands which was a sea of black and white. The fans had decided that those who supported the other team would wear white since it was the common colour on the flags of the two countries and it contrasted well with Hogwarts's robes. Some of the members of the crowd began to wave their huge banners and posters of their favourite player.

Large posters of Viktor Krum in his Bulgarian team uniform could also be seen. Most of the students from Hogwarts were large fans of his.

"Go Krum!" some yelled.

There were also giant posters of Fleur and Harry in their school uniforms. Most of them got their photographs from the Daily Prophet.

The place was heated up despite the cool night.

The giant lights that surround the sides were turned on, lighting up the pitch.

There was a loud 'bang.' Fireworks of the four animals that represented the houses of Hogwarts shot into the sky and roamed around the large pitch. The crowd went wild and applauded deafeningly. Naturally, those who supported Hogwarts were dressed in their plain black robes.

"Well, it's the only match of the year actually," said Lee. "It is the first time that four houses actually come together to form and help this team. I don't know about you but I really want to see how Hogwarts's best seeker fares against the world's best and youngest seeker. As usual, Madam Hooch will referee this game. She's already in position with the balls. How do you think the new team from Hogwarts would fare against the experienced players from the other team? Everyone put your hands together to welcome the Hogwarts team!"

The crowds went wild once again when they saw players dressed in black robes speeding out of the locker room.

"The dashing and shy keeper, Neville Longbottom!"

Neville gave a polite wave when the crowds began to cheer loudly. He was quite surprised when he realised that he had supporters.

"The hot chasers, Susan Bones, Daphne Greengrass and Luna Lovegood!"

Everyone began cheering wildly at the sight of them.

The three chasers split into three directions, flying over the stands, made a round the pitch and flying into position.

"The incredible beaters, Fred and George Weasley!"

They raced out to the fields, grinned and fell into place.

"And the most talented seeker Hogwarts has ever seen, captain of the ship, Harry Potter!"

The crowd went totally crazy at the sight of Harry zipping out with a boyish grin on his face. He winked at someone in the crowd before waving. The girls were squealing and screaming his name.

"I need you to put your hands together once more for the other team!"

Everyone applauded and cheered loudly when a team of players in white flew out of the locker room in a 'V' formation.

"Leading the formation, we have Captain and Seeker, Viktor Krum! Behind him, Beaters Broislav Dimitrov and Theodore Adredov! Chasers, Nickola Durrand, Alette Garcia and Fleur Delacour! Keeper Lisette Simon! I know a strong team when I see one and they are good! Just for your information, only the seekers and the beaters from both teams own Firebolts, the international broom used in the last Quidditch World Cup. What a coincidence huh?"

Everyone stood up and applauded vociferously.

They broke up and fall into place.

"Captains, get down here!" said Madame Hooch, waving them down. There was the customary handshake that they needed.

Harry and Viktor looked at each other with amusement before diving down to the ground.

Instead of the expected handclasp, the two captains hugged each other briefly.

"Play well," said Madam Hooch, smiling warmly, grabbing the box from the ground.

The two captains mounted their brooms and got into their positions.

She took the Quaffle from the box and held it in her hand.

"On my count of three," said Madam Hooch.

"Three-"

"Two-"

"One!"

There was a sharp blast of the whistle and she tossed the Quaffle upwards as the crowds cheered.

The game began.

A/N: Hi everyone, thank you for your wonderful reviews. The next chapter is the final chapter to the fourth year.

By the way, "Jumping over the broom" is actually a wedding ritual of sorts. Couple who want to elope do that to be 'certified' married before running away.

Cedric is not dead and not forgotten. I miss the familiars though.

The idea about the killing curse mentioned briefly in Healer Nolan 's books is an idea from Bexis1's Harry Potter and the Fifth element.

I guess that's about it. Have a blessed week.

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